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An Airmont Romance

LARGE
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Valley of Romance

JEAN WOODWARD

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CHAPTER I

The elegant apartment building was in deep shadow and a spring fog drifted in from the bay as Susan Nash hesitated, then pushed through the carved mahogany door. She smoothed back her golden-brown hair and removed the sunglasses that hid heavily fringed violet eyes, incredibly large, in a heart-shaped face. An expression of dogged determination drew a faint line between fine sable-colored eyebrows as she studied the list of alphabetical names on the pink marbled wall. Scofield, Lawrence—Number 1550.

Susan sighed and stepped into the carpeted elevator. Somehow fifteen flights up—affording an expansive view of San Franciso—seemed to properly fit the deeply resonant voice of Lawrence Scofield.

She watched the numbers flash by as the elevator rose. It was like watching each uneventful year of the twenty-four years of her life. Nothing had really happened, they just went. Like last night, when she had told Eric about answering this ad in the paper, and he had gone away very angry about it. Was that just a silly lovers' quarrel, or did it go deeper than that? Susan never felt so

miserably alone in her life. What was she doing here, on her way up to be interviewed by a stranger for a position as governess, companion, teacher—she wasn't sure which—to a five-year-old boy?

She tugged at her navy blue suit and straightened her blouse collar. There was but one thing to do: go through with it.

The long corridor on the fifteenth floor held a cluster of chairs near the large window that still reflected the glow of the setting sun. A clock on the wall struck five as she rang the bell marked "Scofield."

A gleaming walnut door, with its gold-embossed knob in the center, instead of on the more conventional side, slowly opened. Susan smiled uncertainly at the tall, handsome man. She hadn't expected anyone so young. "Mr. Scofield?" He nodded and motioned her to come in. "I'm Susan Nash. I talked to you yesterday about—" The surprised look in his eyes threw her off guard as she stepped into a thickly carpeted foyer feeling much like a tongue-tied schoolgirl.

"I was expecting you." He glanced at his watch. "Right on time. I like someone who is dependable." He led her into a large, smartly furnished living room. Obviously his remark was not intended for Susan, but for the stunning blonde waiting by the fireplace impatiently tapping a cigarette against the marble mantel.

Mr. Scofield moved with the swift grace of a caged animal and held a cigarette lighter for the blonde. Susan thought she had never seen two more beautiful people. She could almost feel the electricity flash between them. "Miss Nash, this is Miss Valerie McCauley of *the* San Francisco McCauleys." His voice held a mocking tone that matched the look in his eyes.

Miss McCauley nodded carelessly toward Susan, then blocked her out of the conversation. "Larry, must you go right now? You know I had all these jillion plans for us. Can't you send Miss— Miss Nash with the boy and stay here? After all, what is he—"

Impatiently he interrupted her. "Valerie, you know that's impossible. Besides, Miss Nash hasn't met the boy. I don't know if she'll agree to go with us." He turned to Susan. "Forgive Valerie. She's a very determined young lady who always gets her own way well, almost always." He motioned Susan to sit down in one of the matching brown and yellow striped chairs by a round lamp table.

Angrily Valerie scooped up her purse and touched her smartly coiffured hair. "When you come to your senses, or when you return, call me. I may find some time for you."

"I'm sure you will." Larry Scofield answered her with such confidence that Valerie bit her lower lip, hesitated, then reached up and gave him a very

possessive kiss before she flounced out the door. He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped off the lipstick.

Susan had turned away to study the large picture over the fireplace, a head-and-shoulders view of a very young boy. The photographer had captured a lonely-sad expression in the large eyes that tugged at her heartstrings.

"That's Jay," he said quietly. "I snapped that picture the day his cat disappeared."

"Oh." Susan was relieved. "That's why he looks so so forsaken. I hope he found his cat."

"No." Scofield walked over to a large picture window and stared at the sea of twinkling lights fifteen stories below that were beginning to dominate the twilight. Keeping his back to her, he muttered, "No. He lost the cat, and now he's lost his mother, just a few days ago."

Astonished at the remark, Susan gasped, and Scofield whirled around to face her. "Don't be so shocked," he said, the harsh tone of his voice sending chills up her spine. "You didn't know the woman."

A bewildered look flashed across her face as she remembered the stunning blonde, the lingering kiss, and now the revelation that the boy's mother had just died. What kind of person was this man? She clutched her purse and rose to go, to get away from something frightening.

"Sit down, Miss Nash." The clipped command

dropped Susan back into the chair. "At least hear me out." He paused as if trying to gather his thoughts. "The boy's mother, Olivia Lucerno, had been my housekeeper for five years. Since I am a photographer, as you can see, I spend a great deal of time traveling on assignment for *World Magazine*. When I hired Mrs. Lucerno, it didn't matter to me that she was a widow and had the boy to raise. I wasn't here that much, and she had no living relatives. It was a pleasant arrangement for both of us. I have many rare treasures I've picked up in my world travels, and I just felt more secure with someone living here."

Susan stared intently at the large, almond-shaped eyes in the photograph. Jay Lucerno, not Jay Scofield. Then Larry Scofield was a bachelor, perhaps engaged to Valerie McCauley. The thought of what would happen to Jay now kept filling Susan's mind, and she hadn't even met the boy. Instinctively she knew he would rate little concern from Miss McCauley.

Engrossed in her own thoughts, it startled her when Scofield sat down in the matching chair, leaned forward, and spread out his hands in urgent appeal before her. "I don't know where I'm going from here," he admitted. "It all happened so suddenly. One day Olivia was cooking dinner for us, the next day she lay in the morgue, run down by a careless driver."

Susan noted his long slender fingers as he ran

them nervously through abundantly dark, curly hair. He leaned closer, and the magnetism of his heavy-lidded, almost sea-green eyes drew her irresistibly toward him. She felt involved, almost hypnotized by his maleness; this was something she had never experienced with Eric.

"I still don't know what you want of me." The sound of her own voice steadied her nerves. "The ad merely stated, 'Temporary companion for five-year-old boy, must be free to travel.'"

Scofield leaned back in the chair and stretched his long legs, trying to relieve the tension in his body. "I'm not sure myself. I did that on impulse. I guess I'm grasping at straws." He closed his eyes, and Susan waited, wondering about Jay. Where was he?

Apparently he guessed her thoughts. "The doorman and his wife have taken Jay to a movie. He should be home before long." He got up, and leaning his elbow on the mantel, continued. "I have taken time off from the magazine, and I plan to take Jay home to visit my family. The boy needs a change of scene. Maybe a few weeks in Arizona will straighten everything out." Noting the frown on Susan's face, he paused, curiosity mirrored in his eyes. "I just can't help asking, Miss Nash, why you are applying for this job. You're young, beautiful, and you must have your pick of boy friends. Don't you have commitments here?"

Digging into her purse, Susan handed him two

letters and said stiffly, "I have the proper character references, one from the landlady in my apartment building and one from a former employer. You should investigate my credentials."

He read the papers, then handed them back. "Excellent. Now, what about . . .commitments?"

Susan replied as if she had already memorized the answer. "I work in the typing pool at Braden's. My mother died last year. I have no other relatives."

"No special boy friend?" he insisted.

"No. No one too special." Susan heard herself denying Eric Bennett. Somehow she didn't want to expose her relationship with Eric to him. Besides, she wasn't sure why she felt this sudden rebellion to get away from Eric, from bowling every Friday night and from the ritualistic Sunday dinner with his elderly mother. Maybe because it had all become so pat, so routine. Eric considered her his girl, yet there had been no formal marriage proposal, no engagement ring, just a drifting into an understanding of sorts. Susan had begun to panic, feeling smothered and afraid that Eric would suggest they get married and live with his mother. She was most afraid that she would settle for just that. Surreptitiously she began reading the want ads, and when this one appeared, looking so fresh and so different, she impulsively called for an interview. Now she sat in discomfort, wondering how to handle the steady flow of questions.

Larry Scofield interrupted her thoughts. "Miss Nash, do you object to going to Arizona?"

Slowly she shook her head.

"Have you ever been there?"

Again she replied silently, No.

"Are you interested in going as –as Jay's, shall we say, companion, for lack of a better word?"

"But why do you need me if you have a family there? Wouldn't they fill that need?"

"No!" He spoke sternly as his body stiffened. A wave of anger covered his face before he passed his hand over his eyes and forced a smile on his lips, but the somber eyes never changed. "I want someone with Jay at all times. Now that you understand the job, I'll wait for your decision."

A soft tapping on the door gave Susan a little more time to think. A few unintelligible murmurings told her that Jay had been brought home and left with his –what was Mr. Lawrence Scofield now—the boy's guardian, adopted father? What would he do with him?

"Miss Nash, I'd like you to meet Jay Lucerno."

Jay Lucerno, small and thin for his age, reluctantly allowed himself to be pushed forward until he stood at Susan's knee.

"Hello, Jay."

Jay nodded, swallowing a big lump in his throat, never taking his dark eyes off her face, wondering what role she was going to play in his life now that his mother was gone. He glanced fearfully at Mr.

Scofield. Would he send him away? Walking over to the window, he stared at the lights blinking below. Hot stinging tears turned them into colored, blurring monsters, reaching up toward him. Barely listening, he heard Mr. Scofield repeat his name, and he managed to say, "Yes sir?"

"Jay, we're going to Arizona, you and I, and hopefully Miss Nash is coming as your friend. What do you think about that?"

"I don't have a friend," Jay responded flatly.

Mr. Scofield persisted. "Would you like to go to Arizona?"

"I—I guess so." He turned and looked straight at Susan. "But I don't have any friend."

"Jay!" Impatience crowded into Scofield's voice, and Susan shivered at the dead expression in the boy's eyes.

"It's all right, Jay, I understand." She longed to gather him into her arms because he looked ready to explode from unshed tears. Seeing the boy's desperate need, she turned to Scofield. "I would like very much to have you consider me as Jay's companion. I –I will do my best to—to—"

Scofield interrupted. "Good." Relief at her words spread over him and he took her hand. "We'd like to leave in a few days, if you can make it that soon. Give me your address and phone number, and I'll let you know the time. We'll pick you up in a taxi." He took Susan's slender hand and smothered it between his own. Small electric

impulses shot through her body. She flushed in confusion, pulling her hand away so quickly that he apologized. "I'm sorry. I was just grateful for Jay's sake. I think you'll be good for him."

Susan nodded, hoping the pulse in her throat didn't betray the fast way her heart was beating as she scribbled the information on the note paper he had handed her. "I'll see you soon, Jay."

Mechanically the boy said, "Yes, ma'am."

The ride down in the carpeted elevator seemed like a million years away from the ride up, Susan's life had changed so dramatically. Would this change be for the better? Or was she walking into a strange situation she wasn't emotionally equipped to handle?

CHAPTER II

It had been shamefully easy to tie up the loose threads of Susan's life. Miss Brown, head of the typing pool at Braden's, seemed almost relieved to accept her resignation. There were already too many girls for the jobs available.

The landlady promised to keep an eye on the small apartment. There wasn't much to look after: a portable television, her mother's sewing machine, a few odds and ends. Perhaps the decision to help the boy had come from her ability to identify with his loss.

Susan pondered about Eric. Should she call him or write a note? He had been so piqued the other night upon learning that she was determined to go through with the interview, would he listen now?

"Why on earth do you want to subject yourself to this?" he had asked, looking exasperated for one minute, then turning charming the next. "Susan." He kissed her. "Forget this nonsense. It could be very dangerous. You have no idea what could be involved from answering an ad in the paper." Susan had pulled away from Eric's arms as he had added, "Besides, I won't have it!"

"What are you trying to tell me, Eric?"

A stubborn set to his jaw enhanced his annoyed expression. "Frankly, I will not only be disappointed, I'll be very angry if you insist on keeping that interview!"

Eric had left abruptly, and Susan thought a short separation might be the very thing that their relationship needed the most.

Remembering the disturbing scene, she sat down at the wicker desk and wrote Eric in detail about her interview with Lawrence Scofield and her decision to accept the offer, emphasizing her feeling that the boy needed someone, and that this afforded her the opportunity to get away from her present life for a while, to reevaluate her thinking. Susan ended the long letter with the promise to write often so that he wouldn't worry. Finding satisfaction in seeing the decision in writing, she hurried down to the corner mailbox and pushed the letter through the slot. The metallic slam of the lid made everything seem terribly final.

The San Francisco airport, wet and slippery from a steady rain, was overflowing with people scurrying to catch their planes. Susan reached for Jay's hand to reassure him that he was well protected, but Jay, his darting eyes revealing contained excitement, kept his hands in his pockets and stood close to Larry Scofield. He answered politely when spoken to, but remained aloof and quiet. Apparently he didn't know how,

or preferred not, to share himself with someone else. It was going to take time and lots of patience for her to win over this child who acted much too old for his age.

Scofield, a seasoned traveler, soon had them on the crowded plane. He settled Jay next to a window seat in front of the two seats he indicated for Susan and himself.

"Shouldn't you sit with Jay?" she protested. "I can take the other seat."

"No." He nodded at the boy. "I think he prefers it this way." As Susan hesitated he shoved her gently into the seat and laid on her legs the box he had been carrying under his arm. "Trust me." His face colored slightly as he added, "I—uh—got you a few things you'll need on the ranch."

Susan's face reddened, too, from embarrassment. "Mr. Scofield, if you mean clothes, I have two large suitcases." She set the box firmly on his legs. "I couldn't possibly accept these." She wanted to add that because of her ability to sew, taught to her by a very talented mother, she was able to copy originals and was considered the best-dressed girl in the typing pool.

Exasperated, he returned the box. "How can you know before you see what it is?" He lifted the lid and waved his hand at her. "Call them uniforms, if that will make you feel better. It's—it's—they are absolutely essential for where you're going."

Susan lifted out two pairs of blue jeans and two Western-cut blouses, size twelve. "How did you know the right size?"

"Remember, Miss Nash, I'm a photographer. I work with models often enough to be a pretty good judge of their vital statistics."

"Oh." Susan blushed deeper. "I can accept them only if you take it out of my salary."

"If you insist." He unfolded the morning paper and appeared to forget she was sitting next to him.

Susan stared out of the window, conscious of his leg brushing hers or his shoulder touching when he turned the paper. How could he be so blasé when so much was happening?

The big plane taxied into position, and as it lifted off the ground Susan felt as wide-eyed and excited as Jay in the seat in front. Scofield continued to read the news, and she watched San Francisco become smaller and smaller before it disappeared from view. The desire to travel and see more of this enchanting world engulfed Susan, and tears threatened to spill out of her wide eyes. Oh, Eric, she thought, I wish you were more adventurous, more curious about the next mountain or valley. At least then you would understand my longing to experience more of life. Carefully Susan brushed the tears away and stole a glance at Larry Scofield. He was so handsome, so debonair, so removed from anyone she had ever met. She had to get hold of her emotions before

they got hold of her, and before they arrived in Phoenix. How could she feel so involved in someone else's life so quickly? It just didn't fit the complacent image she had had of herself for so long.

If Larry Scofield was surprised or disappointed when only John Hazen, the foreman of the ranch, greeted them, he didn't show it. They loaded the luggage in the wagon, and John headed for home.

After the hills of San Francisco, the extreme flatness of the country surprised Susan. The clear air and brilliant sunshine should be a wonderful tonic for Jay. She tried to amuse the boy while the men visited, yet snatches of their conversation kept drifting back.

"How's Father?" Scofield asked.

"Could be better," was the clipped reply.

"And Craig and Janet?"

Hazen stirred restlessly behind the wheel. "Same. Craig has his cattle and Janet has her dogs."

Scofield threw his head back, laughing. "It doesn't sound as if they've changed much in five years."

Hazen shook his head and settled down to driving. They had quite a few miles to go.

The monotonous hum of the motor proved too much for Jay, and he fell asleep beside Susan. Scofield seemed content to stare out the side

window, as if memories of the past were keeping him company.

The car slowed to thirty-five as they approached a small town with a sign proclaiming: Compton. Population 3,000.

Susan glanced curiously at the shops. A dry-goods store stood next to the post office. Across the street a grocery store and a drugstore huddled together. The west side of the drugstore was scarred with soot from a fire that had gutted out the building next to it. A brown shingled house sat halfway down the block with a weatherbeaten sign out front: "William Marshall, M.D." Toward the end of the block were service stations and machinery stores, one flowing into the other. Susan turned for a quick look through the rear window of the car.

Her employer noticed her searching glance. "What's missing in our little community?"

"The bank," Susan laughed. "Doesn't Compton have a bank?"

"Oh, yes," he said, his voice escalating in the tone of a travel guide. "The bank and the town's only cafe were the first buildings on the right as we approached." His voice dropped in an aside. "You probably blinked your eyes at the wrong moment, miss." He gestured out the window. "Please notice the approaching light pole at the corner of Sixth and Main. See that neatly painted arrow pointing north? It says Library. Therefore, in Compton you can also be literate."

"You sound very knowledgeable, Mr. Scofield."

"I should. I grew up around here." He waved vaguely toward the west. "Our ranch lies over that way about fifteen miles."

Hazen joined the conversation. "Don't forget about your father riding as the Grand Marshal in the Compton Rodeo Parade."

"Ah, yes," Scofield mused, "You should see my handsome father astride his golden palomino, Apache Chief, the color of a newly minted gold piece, holding the American flag and sitting proudly on his silver mounted saddle." His hand pointed the length of the vanishing Main Street of Compton. "The parade comes down the center of town. First my father, then the rodeo queen and her attendants, followed by everyone in the Valley who has a horse to ride. The people start crowding the sidewalk several hours before parade time. It's the most important event of the year, believe it or not." His voice trailed off, deep in remembering the past again.

Susan gazed at the miles and miles of flat farmland, with the concrete ditch that held the irrigation water, the most vital life-giving ingredient in the desert, running parallel to every cultivated acre. The long car ride was just beginning to become tiresome when Hazen turned off the main highway and headed down a stretch of desert road that looked as if it went on forever. The sweet smell of trees bursting with yellow blooms filled the arroyos on both sides.

"Desert Palo Verde," Scofield volunteered, then pointed to a distant rocky hillside straight ahead. "If you look closely, you'll see the house."

"Where?" Susan leaned forward, and he glanced at her.

"You're not looking high enough," he said.

"It can't be on that mountain of rocks. I've never seen such huge boulders stacked against each other." She groped for the right expression. "They remind me of a band of enormous grizzly bears that had been ferociously fighting until an evil witch turned them into stone as punishment."

"Exactly." Scofield approved of her description. "And right in the middle of that mountainous array of 'fighting grizzlies,' my father blasted out enough space to build a house." He added softly, as though talking to himself, "There's something about my father that demands to be on top, looking down, like a god of some kind, arranging people like puppets to obey his commands."

Susan gaped at the imposing structure as they neared a black wrought-iron fence and massive double gates with a large archway of black letters, at least two feet high, spelling out the name Scofield. Hazen honked the horn, and a group of half-naked children came running down the sandy lane. The oldest, a boy about twelve, unlocked the gates and pushed them aside so that they could enter.

The noise startled Jay, and he awoke whimper-

ing, trying to remember where he was. Susan's arm went around his thin shoulders and he relaxed somewhat. At least he didn't pull away.

Hazen drove past small cottages dotting the land near the gates and went up a circular roadway before parking at the side of the house. The back of the pink adobe building looked half swallowed by the huge rock formations that towered high above the roof. A stone chimney rose out of the center, and two long wings, almost engulfed by blooming plants, stretched forward on the flat plateau. The whole structure resembled a giant horseshoe, softened by graceful Spanish arches. Susan wondered at the man's wisdom in forcing his way into the rocks. In San Francisco a good earthquake would rip them apart.

Maria Hazen came bursting through a patio archway and threw her arms around Larry Scofield. "Welcome home, welcome home!"

He returned the hearty greeting, and Susan detected tears in their eyes.

Maria whirled and stared intently at Jay and Susan standing by the car. Walking over, she picked up the startled boy, murmuring, "*Niñito, niñito!*"

John went quickly to her side and spoke sharply. "Enough, woman, enough."

Maria gently lowered Jay to the ground, but her dark eyes held to his face with an expression of great sadness. She must know his mother had just

died, Susan thought. Why else would she be acting so emotionally?

The greetings were violently disrupted by a huge German shepherd dog bounding toward them barking furiously. Jay screamed with such terror that Susan jumped between him and the approaching dog just as an ear-piercing whistle filled the air.

The dog stopped immediately, pointing his ears toward them and baring his teeth in a frightening growl. Susan grabbed Jay's trembling hand as a woman appeared around the corner of the house.

Greatly annoyed, Larry Scofield turned to her. "Call off your dog, Janet, for God's sake. You're scaring my friends to death."

Janet clapped her hands sharply together. "Go, Kolan! Go back to the kennels."

The dog whined and disappeared around the corner of the house as fast as he had come.

Slender as a boy in her Western clothes, Janet pushed her Stetson to the back of her short brown hair and wiped a hand across her freckled face. "Well, welcome home, Larry." Her eyes flicked briefly over Jay and Susan. "It's been a long time." The brother and sister remained apart, measuring each other with intense eyes, perhaps each waiting for the other to show the first sign of affection. Scofield half raised his hands, then let them drop back down at his side as Janet stepped away.

Susan barely nodded at her introduction to the

girl. She was still angry at the careless way Janet had let the monstrous animal scare the boy, and she was too tired to care that the anger showed.

Janet shrugged. "See you all at dinner." Her cowboy boots left small dents in the sand as she went across the patio.

Maria, silent throughout the strange scene just enacted, finally said, "Come, I'll help you get settled." She held out her hand to Jay, and Susan felt a pang of jealousy when he reached out for it. "You will have rooms beside each other."

They crossed the patio and entered the house through sliding glass doors. The many walls of glass made the colorful blooming flowers and shrubs on the patios seem a part of the interior. The far wall of the living room contained a large flagstone fireplace whose clean hearth was filled with an arrangement of fresh flowers. Above the mantel an oil painting of a beautiful woman dominated the room. Susan knew it was Larry's mother because of the same magnetic eyes. Immense davenports, with sculptured red velvet pillows set in ornately carved mahogany frames, flanked a massive Spanish-style cocktail table holding a bowl of fragrant roses. Deep-yellow carpeting set off the stark white walls and the high-beamed ceiling.

Maria led Susan down a hall to a bedroom in the west wing. "You will have time to take a bath and rest before dinner. I will come for you at seven."

Susan's large room also had massive mahogany furniture; the sliding glass doors opened onto a private patio with flower beds that were filled with red bougainvillea, white hibiscus, and strange, exotic cactus. The view of the desert from this height was breathtaking! She could see for miles.

Exploring further, she discovered her own private bath and walk-in closet.

Well, could this be the same Susan Nash who had never done anything exciting in her whole life? She lay down on the huge bed and stared at the high-beamed ceiling, reliving the strange scene between Larry Scofield and his sister, Janet. I wish I had some basis for comparison, she thought. If this is a typical family, maybe I haven't missed too much after all.

CHAPTER III

Still unsure about her place in the household, Susan dressed carefully for dinner, choosing a white linen sheath embroidered with lavender flowers. White high-heeled shoes, rather than the flats she had been wearing, accented her shapely legs. Expertly she added violet eyeshadow to match her eyes and, at the last minute, tied a lavender chiffon scarf around her shining hair. She thought she looked pretty, and when Maria came and exclaimed, "*Señorita linda!* The boys will fight over you," Susan laughed. Maria's honest admiration put color in her cheeks, and she walked confidently into the living room.

Three men, enjoying a drink before dinner, rose simultaneously. A king and his two Prince Charmings, Susan thought. An amused smile tugged at her mouth as Larry introduced her to his father.

Thomas Scofield bowed formally, and when he straightened, she looked up into a sun-browned face with high cheekbones and piercing blue eyes that were, quite frankly, taking her measure. Shaggy white hair and heavy white eyebrows contrasted sharply with his deep tan. Susan smiled as he nodded his approval.

"Miss Nash," Larry continued, "my brother, Craig."

Turning gracefully, she smiled at an exact copy of the older man, except that Craig's hair and eyebrows were a deep brown and he had a full, almost sensual, mouth. The guarded expression in the deep-set blue eyes held her gaze for a moment before he nodded. It was much later that she remembered there had been no welcoming smile on his lips.

Finally Susan turned back to Larry and his admiring look. Her cheeks colored and again she felt strangely uncomfortable. He had changed into Western-cut slacks and a white silk shirt that set off his dark, curly hair. A slender cord around his neck held a large turquoise stone set in silver. The ends of the cord were silver-tipped.

Larry laughed as she glanced at Craig and Mr. Scofield. "Yes," he acknowledged, "we're all wearing the bola, the official Arizona tie by proclamation of the governor." He touched the stone. "This will get you into the most elegant parties in this part of the country."

A young, dark-haired girl with large silver hoop earrings announced dinner. A shiver went up Susan's arm as Larry gently touched her and led the way into the dining room.

Susan enjoyed the formal atmosphere of the beautiful dining room, and she suspected that

Maria's labor of love to welcome Larry Scofield home was responsible for the elaborate setting. Sweet perfume from the lavish flower arrangement in the center of the table drifted through the room, which was further enhanced by an exquisite crystal chandelier.

Her eyes kept straying to the large oil painting on the wall of an older couple staring straight ahead, as people long ago used to pose. The carved frame contained a hidden light that threw a soft halo over the stern expressions. There was no doubt that they were Scofield ancestors. Although the man had a long flowing beard, his eyes were exactly like Thomas Scofield's and his son Craig's. Too bad Janet had turned out to be the plain one of the group.

The senior Mr. Scofield interrupted her thoughts. "What do you think of Arizona so far?"

Susan smiled. "The only adjectives that I can think of are inadequate—enormous, vast, huge. I'm mostly surprised at the lush grass and beautiful flowers growing around your home. I pictured Arizona as being, well, all desert—dry, drab, and colorless."

Craig's eyes deepened in protest. "Miss Nash, although what you see around the house is cultivated, the desert can be a riot of color, too, especially in the spring."

Larry leaned back in his chair. "Why don't you take her and the boy on a tour, Craig?"

Impulsively Susan said, "When are you going to stop saying 'the boy'! He *does* have a name." She stopped, embarrassed for scolding her new employer, especially in front of his family.

"Touché." He laughed, leaning so near it took her breath away. "I also think it's time we were Susan and Larry, don't you?" One arm went around the back of her chair, almost possessively, and he waved the other toward his father and brother. "Obviously three Mr. Scofields will get very confusing. I vote that you limit the mister to Father." He glanced at his brother. "Craig, don't you agree?"

Craig nodded, painfully aware of Susan's beauty and Larry's easygoing banter. His feeling of loneliness increased as he reflected that there should be a pretty, happy woman running the Scofield household. Janet stayed holed up in that little apartment of hers at the kennel most of the time. This place needed laughter and love instead of doleful echoes of a past that was better forgotten.

As soon as dessert was over, Janet raced away to the kennels and Craig quickly excused himself. Mr. Scofield settled down for the news on television.

Darkness had come swiftly, and Larry guided Susan outside to an open patio, laughing with delight as she looked wide-eyed at the enormous sky full of brightly shining stars. Casually he took

her hand, and when she withdrew it he said, "Somehow I feel as if we've known each other for a long time."

Stepping away from his provocative touch, Susan smiled, trying to cover her flustered feelings. "Let's not forget Miss McCauley." She was disappointed when he remained silent instead of revealing his relationship with the blonde woman.

"Come." He led her around a cluster of boulders near the back of the house.

"I don't believe it!" Susan exclaimed as he switched on lights and revealed a large swimming pool. "Up here, on this rocky mountain?"

"Why not?" Larry opened the gate on the wrought-iron fence protecting the pool. "Shall we go swimming?" Susan's face reddened, and Larry held up his hands. "Before you slap my face, now hear this. It's all perfectly proper. There's a cabana, and it has swimming suits, all sizes, for guests." He paused. "At least it *used* to be equipped with everything."

"I'd rather not, not tonight. I—I—" Shamefully the excuses stuck in her throat. Right now she wanted more time and distance between them. The romantic scent of flowers, the clear immensity of the twinkling sky, and the quiet stillness lent a breathtaking enchantment over everything. And Susan, afraid of her underlying emotions, held back.

"Susan, why are you so inhibited?" Larry asked bluntly. "I've only invited you to go swimming. There's nothing compromising in that."

"You're laughing at me, Mr. Scofield." Susan tried to read the expression in his eyes deep in shadow. Quickly she turned and sat down in a chair by the pool. "I am here as your employee," she reminded him, drawing down a curtain on her feelings, "and as yet you haven't given me an outline of what I'm expected to do."

Larry sat down, cupped his chin in his hands, and stared silently into the clear blue water. After a long contemplation he finally admitted, "Susan, I've never met anyone quite like you." A frown appeared on her face, and he hastened to say, "I know, we're discussing the boy —I mean Jay —not you." He stretched his long legs out in front of the chair, an act already becoming familiar to Susan when he was trying earnestly to solve a problem. "Apart from my believing that Jay needs someone with him right now, your role, I suppose, is mostly to guide as well as to be a friend. I said that I'm here on vacation. That's not entirely true. The magazine has commissioned me to do an in-depth article, tentatively to be called 'The Valley of the Sun It's Urban Sophistication.' I'm to take my cameras and capture, for *World Magazine*, a complete picture story of this big area. It's going to keep me very busy for a while, so you'll have to use your own judgment with Jay."

Feeling a wave of disappointment, Susan nodded. "Then I'm to discipline the boy." Larry's eyebrows arched and she laughed. "See, you have me saying the boy instead of Jay. Well, if I do discipline him, will you back my decisions?"

"You bet I will." The confident smile on his face, the touch of his hand when he reached out to help her up, set the pulse in Susan's throat beating faster as they walked back to the patio. "We'll have breakfast together, and I'll explain everything to Jay."

Susan said good night. Instead of going straight into her room, she watched Larry walk swiftly across the moon-drenched yard and go toward the small cottages nestled near the iron gate. Ghostlike, he disappeared, and this added to the mystery she felt at times around him. As she went inside and prepared for bed she wondered if he was here for some devious reason, and using her and the boy to cover it up. His moods were like mercury, and already Susan trusted him one minute and then felt frightened and alarmed the next. Perhaps the long trip and the new surroundings were responsible for her confusion, and not the man himself. She must give him the benefit of the doubt. Getting quickly into bed, she fell into a deep, dreamless sleep almost immediately.

The whimpering, painful noise, almost like a wounded animal, could have been going on for some time before it invaded her consciousness and

forced her awake. Her first fearful thought was that someone outside was trying to get in. Slowly, pretending to be turning in her sleep, Susan faced the sliding glass doors she had carefully locked before retiring. The pale moonlight dispelled any possibility of an intruder on the patio.

The muffled noise came again, and Susan sat up, glancing at the clock on the dressing table: two A.M. Another whimper pulled her eyes toward the door separating her room from Jay's. Quickly she rose, threw on a cotton robe, and quietly entered his room.

Jay lay huddled on one side of the bed with his head buried under a huge pillow, trying to muffle the sound of his crying.

Angry at herself for not coming to him right after dinner instead of delaying so long with Larry, Susan knelt down and gently touched his back. "Jay," she whispered, "are you awake?"

His back tensed under her hand, and the crying stopped.

"Talk to me," Susan said softly. "Jay, don't be lonely. I'm your friend."

The pillow exploded into the air and rocked Susan back on her heels. Jay's dark, frightened eyes sparked with anguish as he sat up. "I don't have a friend!"

Susan sat down on his bed. "I don't, either, and that's why I thought maybe you and I –"

"You do, too," he wailed. "You've got Mr. Scofield."

"Isn't he your friend?" Susan ached to pull the small body, looking even smaller in the large bed, into her arms, and she wondered how a man like Larry Scofield could live in the same house with this child and not get to know him well enough to be considered a friend. There must be something monstrously wrong with Larry Scofield.

"No," Jay said, "Mr. Scofield wasn't home enough to be my friend."

Susan smiled tenderly. To Jay, apparently, to be a friend had a meaning that would take time for her to understand. She pulled him down into the bed and tucked the sheet around his shoulders. "Well, never mind. We'll explore this place tomorrow, you and I, while Mr. Scofield is gone on an assignment." Longing to kiss the thin little face, she touched him lightly on the cheek instead. "Do you think you can sleep now until morning?"

He nodded and almost smiled.

"Will you remember I'm in the next room if you need anything?"

Jay nodded again and watched her move to the door.

Susan looked back. "Why don't I leave this open, just for the rest of the night. Okay?"

"Okay." He had responded quickly, and this time he smiled. It was going to be all right. Somehow she and Jay would become friends.

CHAPTER IV

It was seven before Susan awakened again from a tap on the door and Maria's voice saying, "Breakfast in half an hour, Miss Nash."

Stretching her slender body under the soft sheets, her bare toes explored the large double bed. The new environment began nudging her awake. Opening her sleepy eyes to the bright sunshine tumbling through the glass door, and to the perfume of flowers surging gently on the soft air, Susan sat up quickly. The memory of the night before spilled through her as she realized the alarm clock had not rung and that she was not scheduled to be in Braden's typing pool.

"Breakfast in half an hour," a soft voice with a Spanish accent had just informed her. She threw back the covers, tossed her shortie nightgown to the foot of the bed, and jumped under the shower. The cool water rinsed away the cobwebs of sleep. She rubbed her skin briskly with a towel until it tingled.

After choosing a simple beige cotton dress with a woven straw belt, she slipped into matching straw sandals. A quick brush through her tangled hair, and Susan knew the half hour was gone. She

hurried into Jay's room and found the bed empty.

Following the sound of voices, she walked out to a terrace just off the kitchen, where Jay and Larry were sitting at a round, glass-topped table, drinking orange juice. Happy, chattering birds popped in and out of the orange trees that gave privacy to the patio.

Larry rose as Susan exclaimed, "You seem to do everything out-of-doors here!"

"Why not? This is the Valley of the Sun." He handed her a frosted glass. "Our service also includes fresh juice from our own home-grown oranges."

Dressed in a new cowboy outfit, complete with high-heeled boots, Jay smiled shyly when she said good morning.

Maria carried out a brass tray with brightly colored dishes filled with bacon, eggs, and large golden pancakes. Setting a pitcher of cold milk in front of Jay, she gently scolded, "You drink all of it, *Niño*; you must grow big and strong."

Susan glanced around as she tasted the fresh juice.

"If you're looking for the rest of the family, they've been up for some time," Larry said. "This is a working ranch, but you and Jay have been planned for in the schedule. Craig will be back to pick you up in a four-wheel drive and show you around. I'll take the station wagon and head back to Phoenix. Any questions?"

"What's a four-wheel drive?" Jay asked.

The laugh lines at the corner of Larry's eyes deepened as he patted Jay affectionately on the head. "I should have said jeep." His eyes traveled over Susan's light dress. "Please don't take offense, Susie, but I'd recommend the blue jeans and Western blouse. And I hope you have some sturdy shoes. If not, you can pick up a pair in Compton."

Responding to the name Susie brought quick tears to her eyelids from the agonizing wave of remembering what her dying mother had said. "My Susie, my Susie, I'm sorry to leave you alone. I pray for the right man to come along and take care of you. You need someone."

Noticing the tears, Larry apologized. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you."

"It's—it's nothing, just a painful memory."

The bright clear morning, the birds offering a spring symphony, and Jay's excited voice telling her to hurry and finish breakfast lifted her depressed mood.

Eager to explore the ranch, Jay cleaned up his plate and drank all of the milk that Maria had set before him. Susan finished the last of her pancake and went to her room to change.

Twirling in front of the mirror in the Western-cut pants and the blue short-sleeved blouse, she could see that the outfit flattered her small waist

and long legs. A scarf held her long golden-brown hair off her face, and she tugged on the blue sneakers she had almost left behind in San Francisco.

The warm sun filled the air with incredible beauty as Susan walked back to the terrace, where Maria was picking up the brakfast dishes. She saw Larry stride toward the carport and a young man come toward him. They enfolded each other in a bear hug, and the stranger exclaimed, "Sco! Sco! *Amigo!*"

"Carlos! *Hermano mio!*" Larry shouted.

Stunned at this show of affection, such a contrast to Larry and Janet's meeting, Susan turned to Maria, who had also witnessed the joyous greeting.

"They're like brothers," Maria said with a guarded expression. "They go through school together, have much to remember." The voices faded as the men walked on, arm in arm. Maria hesitated by the table. "Did Larry tell you nothing?"

"I know nothing," Susan admitted, "but I've wondered."

Maria shook her head and shuffled to the kitchen in her beaded moccasins, muttering, "*Pesado corazon* . . . if he wants, he tells."

Jay came around the corner of the house from the swimming pool and grabbed Susan's hand.

"He's coming." Pointing to a tall, rough boulder, he added, "I've been up there watching. He's coming!"

The jeep whined up the circular drive, and Jay pulled Susan toward it. Craig left the motor running as he climbed out. He and Susan exchanged amused glances at Jay's excitement.

Craig helped them get settled. "Well, what do you want to see first? To the north we are planting cotton. Over that way" he pointed vaguely toward a vast desert area "are the feeding pens full of Brahman cattle being primed for market. Or we could go toward the Verde Valley to see the crops—alfalfa, barley, hegari. Right now we're experimenting with safflower."

"Oh, we want to see everything," Jay shouted, then added politely, "Please, sir!"

Craig grinned. "All right, young man, you shall have the grand tour. First the cotton fields."

The flat desert ground at the cotton fields had been pre-irrigated and carefully prepared for the cotton planters, who were going up and down the rows, mechanically dropping the seed into the warm ground. A white pickup sat at the far end of the field, the driver watching.

"That's Dad. He's the cotton man of the family, and I'm the crops-and-cow man."

"And Larry?" Susan asked. "Where does he fit in?"

Craig drove on, past the busy activity in the fields, and had turned south before answering. "Larry's no farmer, never was. He had a camera hanging around his neck all through school, and as soon as he got the training he was off on his own." Craig sighed. "Naturally it caused trouble between him and Dad, but they've managed to live through it."

They arrived at the cattle-feeding lots and watched pen after pen of humpbacked cattle eating hungrily from troughs filled with food pellets. Craig's eyes were animated and friendly as he explained the process of sending a mechanical cuber into the field and having it come back with small pellets of feed, ready for consumption.

The animals, half wild and easily spooked, ran to the opposite side of the pens, bawling and kicking up dirt and tossing their heads angrily at the jeep. The air filled with churned-up dust, and the strong smell of fresh manure, made Susan cough.

Craig apologized and moved swiftly on. "It takes a while to get used to the odors on a farm."

"It's all right, sir." Jay was afraid the tour might be canceled. "We don't mind, honest!"

Before long they reached the verdant fields of fresh-smelling alfalfa, surrounded by the dry, arid desert.

This is so beautiful," Susan said in wonder. "It's

so hard to realize how the desert literally blooms."

Craig nodded. "If you could see the Valley from the air, you'd be amazed at the skillful network of canals. As long as we have water we can grow bigger and better crops." The jeep wound in and out of the fields, with Craig explaining each product.

It was noon before he turned back toward the house on the hill. The excitement had put high color in Jay's cheeks. They sat down for lunch, and Maria hovered over him with another pitcher of cold milk. She would soon have weight on his thin body. As they ate the delicious roast beef sandwiches and crisp salad, Susan pondered how easy her job was going to be after all.

"Time for your siesta." Maria shooed a protesting Jay off to his bedroom the minute he was through. "This way you grow big and strong."

"Thanks for the lovely tour." Susan touched Craig's bare arm and felt his muscles quiver under her hand.

Craig nodded, suddenly brusque, and went back to his work.

Susan hurried to her room and wrote Eric a long letter telling him all about the trip around the huge ranch. After promising to write again soon, she sealed the letter and went in search of Maria.

Everyone had disappeared. Perhaps they were all taking siestas. Dropping the letter on the hall table, she wandered out to the pool and lay down

on a chaise longue in the shade of a eucalyptus tree, falling asleep almost at once.

A soft, persistent pat on her arm finally woke her. Slowly she opened her eyes to see Jay leaning close to her face. "Come on, let's go."

"Go where?" Susan yawned lazily. "Haven't we been all over this place already?"

"Let's go for a walk. We haven't walked." Jay patiently waited while Susan stretched. "Let's walk downhill," he teased, "unless you want to climb up into the rocks."

"No, thanks, and I don't want you climbing around up there, either, young man."

"Yes, ma'am."

Delighted that Jay was so interested in the farm and so full of exuberance, Susan pretended a greater interest than she felt in going for a walk.

They started down the winding drive, Jay stumbling along on his high-heeled boots until they reached the first level plateau of the large ranch. Susan noticed a building to the left in a grove of salt cedar trees. "Let's explore that, Jay."

As they approached it she realized this had to be the kennel Janet had been so eager to get back to last night. Apparently she lived here, coming to the big house only for dinner with the rest of the family.

The building, surrounded by a high wire fence, looked more like a house with a long, enclosed extension built onto the back of it. It appeared

deserted until they walked up to the gate. The large black dog that had scared Jay when they arrived growled menacingly from the other side.

"Don't worry," Susan said. "We aren't about to come in."

The door of the building flew open, and Janet stepped out. "Oh, I had hoped it was Doc Davis." Crossing to the gate, she commanded, "Kolan, at ease." The dog dropped down, looking harmless and almost friendly. "He won't hurt you, not after I establish that you're okay." She unlocked the gate, and as they hesitated she added, "It's safe. Come on in."

Jay stepped behind Susan before entering.

"Kolan, shake hands with the boy," Janet commanded, and the big dog sat up and raised his paw. "Go ahead," she urged. "He wants to be your friend."

Jay reached out cautiously, touched the paw, drew his hand quickly away, then moved it back to the dog.

"Don't you have a dog?" Janet asked.

"No." Jay smiled uncertainly. "But I had a cat once."

An angry look crossed her face. "A cat! You should have a dog."

"That's impossible in an apartment." Susan wanted to establish that fact before Janet carried this any further.

"Oh, that's right." Janet gazed at the boy with

such sorrow in her eyes that Susan turned to go.

Janet held up her hand. "Let them alone for a while. Let them get acquainted." She moved toward the building and picked up a ball. "Here, Kolan, take this to Jay."

The dog bounded over with the ball, and Jay became more and more confident that the animal wouldn't hurt him.

An old truck, wheezing and chugging noisily, drove up to the gate in a cloud of dust, and Kolan ran to meet the elderly man climbing out with a doctor's bag in his hand. "Go on with ye, ye ornery devil," the affectionate voice teased the dog. "Ye get your old lady full of babies, and I have to come out here and be the midwife." He nodded to Susan and Jay and walked around to the rear of the building, in a hurry to see the sick dog again. At the same time Janet entered the kennel and closed the door without a backward glance. Susan and Jay had been suddenly dismissed or forgotten.

"Come on." Jay tugged at Susan, glancing fearfully at Kolan now that Janet was no longer present.

There was something so arrogant in the way that Janet had shut the door against them that Susan agreed. "Let's get back to the house."

Stepping outside the yard, Susan turned to lock the gate. Her eye was caught by a glare of light reflecting on a vial of medicine lying in the sand. Apparently it had been dropped by the hurrying

doctor. Picking it up, she wondered if he might be searching for it right now. "Wait here, Jay." Brushing off the dirt on the vial, she went back to the building and knocked loudly on the door. There was no response, and finding it unlocked, she stepped inside, wondering whether to leave the medicine or call out to Janet.

Susan gasped in complete surprise. The room she had stepped into was far more luxurious than her small apartment in San Francisco, and much larger than it looked from the outside. Shag carpeting, a deep shade of burnt orange, covered the floor. The sofa, and a large chair and ottoman sitting in front of a Ben Franklin stove, were covered in a white vinyl. A small bar with a tiny sink and refrigerator filled one wall beside the large window. Two guitars were hung close together on the other side of the window. The room was feminine, smartly decorated. It just didn't fit the mannish, plain-looking Janet Scofield.

Susan hesitated, then set the medicine down on the large glass-topped coffee table and turned to leave.

A door at the back of the room burst open, and Janet slammed it behind her. "How dare you come into my private place!" Lips drawn tightly against her teeth, and eyes flashing fire, she strode toward Susan. "Who sent you down here?" Angrily she grabbed Susan roughly by the shoulders.

The grip of Janet's strong fingers cut deeply into Susan's arms. Crying out in pain, Susan shoved the wildly attacking girl back against the bar and picked up the first heavy object she could find, a boot-shaped ashtray. "Don't you ever do that again," she warned tensely, standing her ground. "I came in here to leave some medicine the doctor had dropped by the gate. I had no other reason." She held the ashtray above her head, ready to smash it in Janet's face if she came at her again.

Trying to control the seething, unreasonable rage sweeping over her, Janet shuddered and motioned Susan to put the ashtray down. "I'm—I'm sorry, but nobody's allowed in here. I mean nobody!"

Shaking and frightened, unable to understand the reason for the attack, Susan turned to leave.

Janet held her back. "Please don't tell anyone about this, please!"

Susan pulled free and went out the door, eager to blot out Janet's tormented face, and determined not to make any foolish promises that might prove too dangerous to keep.

CHAPTER V

Choking with tears, Susan hurried back to Jay, and they walked toward the house on the hill. As they reached the first rise in the road, a trail of dust billowed up in the air, and a school bus stopped down by the iron gate. Several dark-haired, dark-skinned children piled out. It was the same children they had seen open the gate on their arrival.

"Maybe you can play with them on Saturday. Would you like that, Jay?"

"No."

"They live in those houses down by the gate. You could be friends."

"I don't have any friends."

The remark was said so decisively and sounded so deep-rooted in the boy's thoughts that Susan said quickly, "You won't ever have any friends, either, if you don't try to be one yourself."

The pinched look came back to Jay's face, the same haunted expression he had shown the day they had met, and she was sorry for speaking so abruptly. "Can you swim, Jay?"

"No."

"I can teach you. Let's plan on a swimming lesson tomorrow."

"Yes, ma'am."

They reached the house. Jay walked away without a backward glance, resigned to learning something new tomorrow.

Maria fed him in the kitchen while Susan freshened up for dinner, eager to see Larry again.

The faithful grandfather clock solemnly tolled seven, and everyone took his place at the stately dining-room table. Everyone, that is, except Janet.

Mr. Scofield, his bushy white eyebrows knit together in a deep frown, waited for several minutes before giving the signal that dinner could be served. "Janet is, as usual, not dependable."

Looking tired and sunburned, Larry touched Susan briefly on the shoulder, just enough to send a touch of extra color over her face.

Craig nodded, withdrawn and silent, the friendliness he had exhibited on the tour of the ranch completely gone.

"Janet was very busy at the kennels today," Susan volunteered. "Perhaps she can't get away right now."

All three men fixed startled eyes upon her.

"Were you down there?" The sharp sound of Mr. Scofield's voice suggested she had been out of bounds.

"Why, yes, Jay and I went for a walk after lunch."

"I thought you were with Craig." The tone of censure in Larry's voice and the cold, expressionless look on Craig's face compounded her confusion. Why should she be put on the defensive just for going down to the kennels?

"We toured the ranch all morning," she said. "I—I saw no harm in taking Jay for a walk after he awoke from his nap."

"Did you talk with Janet?" Larry asked.

"Yes," Susan answered more sharply than she had intended. "We were there when the doctor came."

"The doctor?" Mr. Scofield said.

"I mean, the veterinarian."

"Oh. Doc Davis." His manner relaxed a little, but the three men exchanged sober glances, and Susan felt as if she were somehow on trial. She had planned to tell Larry about her run-in with Janet, but now she wasn't sure. Maybe Janet needed a friend as much as Jay did. She had certainly seemed desperate this afternoon, fighting against any outside intruder. Did Janet consider the members of her own family trespassers at the kennels? Perhaps it would be safer to say nothing.

Dinner was somewhat strained until Craig asked Larry about his day on the new assignment.

"Fabulous." Larry's easygoing banter promptly returned. "I'm amazed at the number of skyscrapers beginning to alter the Phoenix horizon. And now, with the more sophisticated clubs springing

up in those ivory towers, it no longer has that cow-town image. I could be here for weeks and still not capture everything." He reached over and covered Susan's hand with strong fingers. "Perhaps you can come with me one day and see it all for yourself."

The casual, possessive touch sent shivers up her spine again, and Craig's face reddened slightly, as if he resented the gesture.

The father, noticing the exchange of mixed emotions, engaged Craig in a conversation about cotton and cattle for the remainder of the meal.

Instead of disappearing after dessert was over, Craig joined them in the living room. It almost seemed as though he was deliberately keeping Susan and Larry from being alone.

The brothers lapsed into childhood memories and "remember whens" until Susan wanted to scream at them to stop talking about the past. Feeling left out of the conversation, she excused herself and was acutely disappointed when Larry nodded casually and let her go to her room without protest.

Restless and out of sorts, she listened to the small radio on the bedside table until midnight. Still unable to sleep, and unwilling to probe into the reason why, she slipped on a light robe and stepped out on the patio.

The huge, wide-open sky full of twinkling stars, and a brilliant full moon bathing the place in

softness, brought a tender smile to her face in spite of her restlessness. Impulsively she decided to watch the moon reflect on the clear water in the swimming pool. It might ease the miserable tension and enable her to get sleepy.

Cautiously she walked around the house and opened the iron gate silhouetted in the moonlight.

"I thought you'd never come!"

Whirling around, Susan gasped as Larry stepped out of the shadows.

"Call it ESP, mental telepathy, or whatever, but I've been waiting here for you." He pulled Susan into his arms and sought her lips in a tender, romantic kiss.

Taken by surprise, she responded to the kiss, then moved away, trembling from his nearness.

Larry held firmly to her hand, whispering, "Susie, Susie, I —I —" His voice stopped abruptly, and his clasp on Susan's hand tightened as he hastily pulled her into deeper shadows.

A stealthy figure moved in the orange grove by the patio. Someone had been spying on them. But why at this hour, and what was he looking for? Was it Craig? Could it be Janet? The figure melted swiftly away, aware he had been discovered.

"Come! I'll see you safely to your room." Holding his finger to his lips for absolute quiet, he led her back, then insisted on searching her room and checking on Jay. "Lock the sliding door when I leave," he whispered. "I'll see you at breakfast."

Susan snapped the bolt and pulled the draperies across the glass door, locking out the sudden chill of apprehension. Feeling more frightened than when she had been confronted with Janet's strange behavior, she tried to calm her jangling nerves. Larry had been so genuinely delighted when she arrived at the pool, and then had mysteriously transformed them both into figures fleeing from a stranger's shadow. Why, why why, kept pounding against her throbbing temple. A glance at the clock showed it was one A.M. Softly touching her lips still burning from Larry's kiss, she knew she hadn't been dreaming. A romantic kiss in the moonlight might not mean a thing to Larry Scofield. What did it mean to Susan Nash?

Reluctantly she glanced at her image in the mirror, afraid to question the unfulfilled hunger lingering in her eyes. It would be better to think about all this in the bright sensibility of the day. She forced herself to go to bed and listen to the radio until she finally drifted into troubled sleep.

Although Susan had turned off her alarm, she awoke early and lay in the semidarkness, reliving the sweet sensation of Larry's kiss. Did it really mean anything to either of them? Last night, clothed in the magic of moonlight, an awakening romance seemed all right. But now the haunting faces of Valerie McCauley and Eric Bennett rose before her. A warning angel seemed to sit on her shoulder as she got up and pulled back the

draperies, letting in the bright sunshine. "Slow down," the angel whispered. "What do you really know about Lawrence Scofield? He's your employer, and that's all. Perhaps last night meant nothing to him."

Susan shook her head, trying to clear her mind. Right now safe, dependable, predictable Eric seemed most desirable. But from here San Francisco seemed so far away, and Eric so remote.

Susan carefully selected a vibrant pink dress that flowed gracefully over her trim figure. Then she hurried to the breakfast terrace, hoping to find Larry alone. Perhaps, after feeling the pressure of his kiss, just seeing him would clear up some of her confusion.

Jay sat at the table with Larry, drinking orange juice and talking about Kolan. "I touch him, sir, we shake hands, and then we play ball."

The warm look in Larry's eyes, the soft pressure of his hands when he seated Susan, reassured her that last night was more than a gossamer filament of her imagination. The singing birds and the sweet scent of honeysuckle accented the newly felt joy surging through her body.

Maria set the table with juice, golden waffles, and warm syrup. "You'll all too skinny! This put some meat on the bones." She pointed at Jay. "Especially you, little one. Drink all of your milk."

Larry grinned in that lopsided way Susan was

finding so attractive. "Well, what are you planning for today while I'm gone?"

"I thought a swimming lesson might be in order." Susan smiled happily at him, then blushed when she saw Maria staring intently at her. What was that old saying about wearing your heart on your sleeve? If Maria already suspected that she might be falling in love with Larry, she had better be more careful.

"Jay," Larry asked, "do you want to learn to swim?"

"No, sir, but I will."

"What would you rather do?"

"Go back and play with Kolan."

"Learn to swim," Larry advised firmly.

"Yes, sir." Jay finished his breakfast, drank all of the milk, and wandered off by himself.

Larry poured another cup of coffee from the carafe on the table. "Susan, how did it go yesterday down at the kennel?" he asked.

Surprised at being questioned about yesterday when she fully expected him to justify last night, Susan cautiously replied, "Fine. Why?"

"Was Janet friendly?"

"Janet was too worried about the dog to think of much else."

"Did she and Jay get to be friends?"

"No. Jay still insists he has no friends."

"I see." Larry sipped his coffee, deep in thought.

"It might help if I knew what was going on around here." The shock of surprise on Larry's face at her pointed remark added flame to Susan's quick anger. She felt there was something incomprehensible going on in this secretive family and she was being deliberately kept in the dark. She didn't like it. "You've got to admit this household isn't exactly normal. Especially after last night."

"What about last night?" He seized her wrist. "Did you see anyone after I left you?"

"No. Larry, you're hurting me." Tears appeared in Susan's violet eyes, and Larry quickly released her arm as Maria came out to clear the table.

"Sorry, Susie," he glanced hastily at his wristwatch. "I must be on my way to Phoenix. We'll talk again tonight." He walked quickly away without a backward glance.

A dark, foreboding look passed over Maria's face, and her fingers made the sign of the cross. "A troubled man, that one. His bed wasn't slept in last night." She muttered something in Spanish as she put the dishes on the tray, something that Susan couldn't understand, but it raised goose bumps on her arms.

A prickly feeling of fear spread over her. His bed hadn't been slept in! But why? Where had he gone? Why was he so concerned about Janet, the sister he had barely spoken to after a five-year absence?

Susan hurried back to her room, shutting out

the sound of the birds and wishing that the thoughts of love could be silenced as easily. Eric was right; she had had no business answering a strange ad in the paper. Here she was entangled in a mysterious family and about to fall in love with its most secretive member.

She walked to the closet, intent on getting out her suitcases. It would be better to escape now, to get back home before the entangled web of the Scofield clan wove any tighter around her. After all, Eric—safe, dependable Eric—would happily welcome her back to Friday-night bowling and Sunday dinner with his mother. It wasn't much, but it was security.

Susan leaned her hot forehead against the cool wood of the closet doors. What about Jay? Who would protect him? Larry? No, he was away too much. Craig? Mr. Scofield? Maria? Not Janet, definitely not Janet. Her searching mind wandered over the assortment of people, finding no one she could trust with Jay. Why did she feel he needed so much protection? She sighed and sat wearily on the bed, not knowing what it was that kept nagging at her deep inside, but something was going to keep her here for Jay's sake. She had grown up lonely, feeling that she had missed too much from life. With all her heart she wanted to shelter Jay from the same shattering experience. Tears slipped unheeded down her cheeks as she opened the door again to let in the sound of the singing birds.

CHAPTER VI

The days slipped quickly by. Susan wondered if, after all, her imagination hadn't been working overtime. Jay was learning to swim the length of the pool, and they were both getting as brown as polished chestnuts from the constant, beaming sun.

The transformation in Jay pleased her the most. He was filling out, beginning to laugh and act like a five-year-old boy should. He still refused to mingle with the other children, but that would come with time.

Susan's relationship with Larry, on the other hand, had grown more vague since the night by the pool. Working hard on his assignment, he would frequently call from Phoenix and say he was staying there in order to get pictures of the city at night. On those evenings Susan visited with Craig, since his father preferred to go to bed early.

Janet remained remote and unfriendly until the day she came running up the hill, shouting, "They came last night!"

Jay ran to meet her. "The puppies? Do you mean the puppies?"

"Yes. The puppies. Eight of them." Janet

grabbed Jay's hands, and they twirled happily around the yard shouting, "The puppies are here, the puppies are here." The bursting smile softened Janet's face, and since Jay had turned a golden brown, they could easily have passed as brother and sister. Susan noticed the resemblance and wondered if perhaps this might open the way for Jay to stay on the ranch permanently. Maybe she could talk about it to Craig, since Larry was gone so much of the time.

Susan's opportunity came sooner than she had expected. The day had been unusually warm, and the night was offering little relief. Feeling restless, and unwilling to go to bed, she slipped into her bathing suit and walked out to the pool.

The sweet fragrance of the orange trees filled the clear air as she stood looking down at the water.

"Hello!" Craig walked up to her. "May I join you?"

Grateful for the company, Susan discreetly eyed the tall, bronzed man in white bathing trunks. He was more muscular than Larry, and when he smiled, she admitted reluctantly to herself, he was quite handsome.

"Well," he asked, "do I pass inspection?"

The color blazed on Susan's cheeks. "I—I'm sorry."

"I know." He looked down at her with a twinkle in his eyes. "You were comparing me with my brother. It's the story of my life." He strode past

her and dived gracefully into the deep end of the pool.

Excited at the prospect of having a grown-up swimming partner for a change, Susan temporarily forgot about Larry and what his kisses had meant to her. She poised on the diving board, looking like a beautiful sea nymph, then joined Craig in the pool.

He tossed her a beach ball, and they had a lively game of catch until she was too winded to continue. "It isn't fair," she sputtered, gasping for breath. "You're in better shape than I."

"Nobody," Craig roared, "but nobody with eyes in his head would ever believe that." He pulled her out of the water, and they lay down on thick beach towels, gazing up at the beautiful night.

"Craig," Susan asked impulsively, "how can you stay single in this romantic setting? I've never seen such stars—and look at that enchanting moon!"

Craig remained silent for so long that she decided he wasn't going to answer such an impertinent question. He finally rolled over onto his stomach and looked thoughtfully into her eyes. Judging for himself that Susan was really asking out of friendship and not idle curiosity, he began talking softly, reminiscing.

"I was engaged once. Then Maggie and I had one of those crazy lovers' quarrels, so crazy I don't remember what it was all about. But Irish Maggie

Kelly flew off to Indiana to visit an aunt, and we just never got back together."

"Did you try?"

"Of course," Craig said. "Our phone bill was astronomical! But Maggie flew to Europe with this aunt, and I—I took Carlos and we went to Mexico City . . .stayed a month . . .trying to get Maggie out of my system." He lay back on the towel and stared at the sky, reliving his past.

Susan was sorry she had been so painfully personal. Craig was too serious, yet she could understand. Some people fall in love just once, thinking it will last forever. This must have happened to him.

"Craig, this may not be the time or the place, and actually it's none of my business, but I've been wondering. Do you suppose Jay could live here on the ranch permanently?"

Craig put his hands behind his head and watched the moving moon playing hide-and-seek with the scattered clouds. "I've thought about that, too," he admitted, "and you can bet that Larry has something like that in mind, or he wouldn't have brought him out here in the first place. But knowing Larry, there's nothing we can do about it until he shows his hand." He sat up and leaned toward her. "I honestly can't figure out where you fit in. Are you in love with my brother? Are you just pretending to be Jay's companion?"

"How dare you insinuate that that there's something immoral going on between Larry and me!" Susan jumped to her feet, glaring at Craig. "I'm Jay's companion and that's all!" Remembering Larry's moonlight kiss only made her feel guilty.

"But why?" Craig insisted in spite of her anger. "Why does Jay need a watchdog?"

The iron latch on the pool gate rattled. "It was my idea!"

Craig and Susan turned around to face Larry. He was watching them, a hard expression on his face as he walked in.

Susan scooped up her towel and stalked past him. Let them fight it out. She had had enough. If Larry thought she was easy prey for her affections, indiscriminately passing out kisses in the moonlight, then he was in for a big surprise. Although offended by Craig's remark, she could see how it might look. Even Maria had her suspicions. Maybe Craig had been the one spying on them the other night, and when Larry went into her room to make sure it was safe, Craig had jumped to false conclusions.

Susan slammed her door and threw the towel in a heap on the bathroom floor. Tears of anger and disappointment streamed down her face as she showered and slipped into a fresh nightgown. She would demand that Larry drive her into Phoenix, and she would take the first plane back to San

Francisco and the safety of Eric's dependable arms. Surely Craig would back up her suggestion that Jay live on the ranch.

Because she was tired, and fighting bad dreams most of the night, Susan overslept. When she finally dressed and went out for breakfast, Jay had finished eating and was intently listening to Maria speaking Spanish to a slender young man, the same one who had embraced Larry and called him Sco. They stopped talking immediately on seeing Susan.

"This is Carlos," Maria said. "Larry asked him to teach you and the *niño* to ride the horses."

"Ride?" Susan knew nothing about horses, and she wasn't too interested in learning. "Where is Larry?" She really wanted to face him today and settle on a time for her return to San Francisco.

Maria threw her hands up in the air. "Go, go all the time, that one. Sit. I fix your breakfast."

"No, please, I'm not hungry."

"Grapefruit and toast, that isn't too much."

Susan sat down. It was easier to eat than to argue with Maria.

Jay sidled up to Carlos. "We have eight new puppies."

Carlos squatted on his heels before the boy. "Have you seen them?"

"Yes." Jay grinned. "I get the pick of the litter."

"Jay!" Susan spoke sharply, unable to stem the feeling of irritation she had gotten up with. "You

haven't seen them. Why do you tell Carlos that you have?"

"I did, too, this morning. Janet took me to the kennel before you got up."

"Oh. I'm sorry, I didn't know." Larry could accuse her of neglecting her job if he found this out. Well, the boy didn't need a "watchdog," as Craig had put it. He was doing all right, so what difference did it make? Carlos seemed unusually intrigued by Jay. Perhaps, she thought idly, he had a boy the same age.

She delayed as long as possible over the grapefruit, not really wanting to ride, but with Jay so eager to learn, there wasn't much choice. She went to her bedroom and changed her clothes, realizing she was again wearing the jeans and Western shirt that Larry had insisted on buying.

Jay clapped his hands joyfully when she returned, and Carlos said, "Let's go, *amigo*." He held the door open to his old truck while Susan got in. Jay crawled between them and Carlos slammed the door. "This mechanical monster is called the roustabout. Please hang on!"

He threw the old truck in gear and roared downhill at a terrifying speed. Susan and Jay held hands, afraid that he might drive them right off the mountaintop.

"Sit loose," Carlos laughed. "I will get you there safely."

The stables, set apart from the rest of the

livestock, surprised Susan with their look of cleanliness. The sturdy buildings constructed of pumice block were surrounded by corrals made of redwood boards spaced about a foot apart.

A spirited horse in one of the corrals raced back and forth. The magnificent golden coat and white, flowing mane and tail identified him as Mr. Scofield's Apache Chief. He watched them with inquisitive eyes and flaring nostrils, perhaps hoping for a bite of an apple or a handful of grain.

"What a beautiful animal!" Susan exclaimed. "No wonder he leads the parades!"

"You know about that?"

"Mr. Scofield –Larry—mentioned it when we drove through Compton."

"*Si.*" Carlos nodded. "Apache Chief is widely known here in the Valley. You should see all the ribbons and silver cups he's won."

Jay crawled up on the fence and looked doubtfully at Apache Chief. "Am I going to ride him, Carlos?"

Carlos roared with laughter, his dark eyes sparkling. "I think we start you out with a little slower mount, *amigo*. Apache Chief will have to come later." Carlos chuckled again. "Much later."

John Hazen came around the corner of the stables, leading two horses. John greeted them warmly, then patted the neck of one of the mares. "This," he said to Jay, "is your horse, Skippy. What do you think about that?"

Jay backed away. "She's awfully big!"

Hazen smiled. "No, son, she's not big. You're just small. Come here, she won't hurt you." He winked reassuringly at Susan. "Skippy is very gentle." He boosted a reluctant Jay up on her bare back.

Jay stared at his legs dangling on either side of the mare. "Where's my saddle, sir? Did you forget?"

"No saddle," Carlos said. "Not until you learn how to ride first." Noticing the dismay on Susan's face, he laughed. "This rule does not apply to you, Miss Nash."

John walked over with the other mare and helped Susan into the saddle. Carlos swung up on a frisky appaloosa stallion. "Whoa, Lucky Dot." Carlos patted the lively horse. "Behave yourself today." He led them carefully around the stables to the iron gate, leaned down from the horse, and opened it, motioning Susan and Jay to ride through before he closed it again.

Jay held tightly to the reins, his legs gripping the sides of the mare. The stiff leather saddle squeaked under Susan's light weight, and the motion of the horse jolted every bone in her body.

"Relax," Carlos advised. "You won't fall off, and the horse will get you back safely."

The ride into the sprawling, ever-changing desert started out in single file. Carlos led them slowly around tall, prickly saguaro cactus pock-

marked with bird holes. Scurrying little ground animals crisscrossed in front of them in the soft sand. Carlos pointed to a large, awkward bird running on spindly, clumsy legs. "There's a roadrunner. Watch him follow us."

Jay laughed as the bird ran ahead, then stopped and waited for them to catch up.

Carlos grinned. "Now can you see why he's called the clown of the desert?"

In a few hours the sun became uncomfortably warm, and Carlos turned back. "That's enough for today." He noticed their red cheeks. "Ask Sco—I mean, Mr. Scofield to get you a straw hat. As the days grow hotter you're going to need it for protection."

Susan and Jay were stiff and sore when they got back to the stables, and John helped them off the horses.

Carlos patted Jay on the back. "We'll go again tomorrow, *amigo*. You'll be an expert rider soon. It's born in you."

Susan rubbed her aching backside, wondering why Carlos told Jay it was born in him and didn't say anything about her first riding lesson. Male superiority, she thought as Carlos drove them back to the house. Never mind; all she cared about at this moment was a hot bath.

Susan peeled out of her dirty, sweaty jeans and crawled gratefully into the steaming bubble bath, groaning as she discovered sore muscles every time

she moved. She added more hot water and slid down into it until her chin touched the bubbles. Then she began to think about Jay. He had thrived on that ride into the desert. She had seen with her own eyes the love developing between him and the horse Skippy. Susan sighed. Even though she had had it up to her eyebrows with Larry, Jay's security was still uppermost in her mind. It was vital that he find a real home. Where was that going to be? Who would give him the permanent affection that he needed? She didn't have the answer, but Craig seemed to think that Larry knew what he was going to do. Feeling as she did about Jay, she still could not turn her back on him and go home.

She towel-dried her pink-tinged body, put on a pair of cool shorts and a sleeveless blouse, and lay down on the bed. Worn out from the ride, she fell sound asleep.

The sliding glass door rattled, jarring her awake nearly two hours later, and she sat up abruptly as Jay walked in.

"Janet let me watch the puppies eat."

"Oh? You've been seeing a lot of Janet and those puppies."

"One of them is mine." His eyes turned dark and serious. "I think I'll call him King."

Annoyed that Janet had promised Jay a dog, Susan cautioned, "You can't take a puppy back to San Francisco, Jay. What would you do with him?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'll just have to stay here where the puppy is." Imploring Susan to understand, he grabbed her arm. "If we go back to San Francisco, we'll find some way to keep him, won't we?"

"I can't promise you that, Jay. We'll have to wait and see."

Jay turned his back and stared out the window. "What's going to happen to me? Do you know where I'm going to live?"

"No," Susan admitted, "but I'm sure that Mr. Scofield will take good care of you."

"No, he won't," Jay stated flatly. "I got nobody." Tears filled his eyes. "Not since . . .since . . ." His voice choked up, and Susan pulled him close to her and held him as hot tears dropped on her hands. It just wasn't fair that Larry kept the boy wondering.

"Let me talk to Mr. Scofield," Susan said. "In the meantime, you have me. So please don't worry."

CHAPTER VII

Larry was being especially attentive during dinner, and Susan noticed the scowl on Craig's face as Mr. Scofield asked questions about the cattle. Craig answered vaguely and without interest. Even Larry's face registered surprise that his brother's every thought and act weren't centered completely on the farm's activities.

As soon as dessert was over, Larry casually remarked, "Why don't we drive into Phoenix and go to a show?" He turned to Susan. "You should see a little of the night life around here."

Susan glanced down at her sleeveless blue dress with its white leather belt encircling her small waist, and Larry answered her unspoken question. "You look terrific, Susie; no need to change." She felt a surge of excitement as his sea-green eyes beamed approval of her appearance.

He turned to his brother. "Craig, will you join us?"

Instead of answering immediately, Craig first studied the expression on Larry's face and the high color in Susan's cheeks. "No, I have paper work to do." His jaw tightened, and he started out of the room as if he were afraid to linger, afraid he would change his mind.

"Then, do you mind if we borrow your convertible, Craig? It's more" –Susan held her breath, wondering if Larry was going to say "romantic" "suitable than the station wagon."

A muscle flicked in Craig's taut cheek, betraying his hidden emotions. "No, go ahead. You know where the keys are."

Susan hurried to her room to freshen up and to check on Jay. Since coming to the ranch, Maria had served his dinner in the kitchen, and afterward her niece kept Jay company in his room, where they watched television or played games until bedtime. Larry had insisted on this arrangement from the beginning, saying it was best for the boy. And apparently it was, because tonight Lupe was teaching him to play jacks. Concentrating on bouncing the tiny ball and picking up jacks, Jay barely had time to tell Susan good night.

In spite of Larry's insistence that she looked fine just the way she was, Susan quickly slipped into her favorite party dress, a soft white chiffon that accented her deep tan. A black velvet ribbon, studded with rhinestones, circled her waist. Black pumps with rhinestone buckles and an evening bag to match completed her costume.

Waiting patiently for her beside the car, Larry was stunned at her changed appearance. "Susie, you are a knockout!" Helping her into the car, he bent over and kissed her cheek before shutting the door.

The sleek, powerful car, gold on the outside with a softer gold interior, ate up the miles into Phoenix, and Susan relaxed in anticipation. "Somehow a convertible doesn't fit Craig's image," she said.

"Well, young lady," Larry mocked, "what *is* Craig's image?"

She tried to analyze just how Craig appeared to her. "He seems more...settled? Sedate? Oh, how can I describe a very nice person who just sort of blends into the background, but still you're glad he's there?"

"Why don't you try? Dependable...a rock of Gibraltar...comfortable as an old shoe..."

"You're laughing at me again!" Susan faced him accusingly. "You are so quick to—to mock!"

"No, Susie," Larry said. "But you're like Craig. You take everything too seriously." His hand gripped hers on the seat between them. "If you can learn to laugh at life, you'll have a lot more fun."

Susan shivered at his touch. "But life has more meaning than just a good laugh. It's too serious to be considered a big joke." Her voice trembled, thinking of how her mother had worked, sewing for other people, so that she and Susan could survive. There had been happy days when they had packed a lunch and rode a bus to the beach, but mostly life had been very serious. Perhaps the two women had felt trapped by it. Although her mother was attractive, she had never gotten over

her first and only love, Susan's father. He had gone to war and never returned, so there had not been a male in their household. Susan avoided boys in high school and business college. She was pretty but too remote to attract the carefree, fun-loving dating crowd. When Eric happened along, stable but unexciting, she had assumed theirs was a normal courtship. Until now. Larry's touch awoke a hidden longing she couldn't explain and didn't want to face.

Larry shook her hand. "Hey, quit woolgathering. I don't like that frown on your gorgeous face."

The lights of Phoenix were exciting and stimulating to Susan, after having been so isolated on the ranch. They went to a nice theater and afterwards Larry escorted her to one of the high-rise nightclubs for a drink and a breathtaking view of the twinkling city. He pointed out the areas he had been photographing, and Susan noticed several couples wave to him across the room. Either he had established new friends or they were past acquaintances, but he made no move to join anyone. He was keeping Susan all to himself.

The small orchestra began playing soft, romantic music, and Larry guided her to the dimly lit dance floor and tenderly gathered her into his arms.

Susan shut her eyes and responded to his graceful steps, wishing the exquisite unreality of

the evening could go on forever. When the dance ended he whispered, "Let's get out of here."

Larry settled Susan in the car before he pushed a button on the dashboard and lowered the top on the convertible. The ride home prolonged the evening's enchantment. Susan put her head back against the seat and watched the ever-changing mood of the sky. It was enough to hold Larry's hand and listen to the soft music on the radio.

She smiled, in a dream world of happiness, when Larry pulled up at the iron gate. "I've had the most wonderful time. I I can't tell you."

"Hush, my pet." Larry kissed the tips of her fingers. "Wait until we get up to the house, and we'll sit out by the pool." His eyes promised more stardust and enchantment as he leaned over and gently kissed her on the lips. "Wait, my love."

He stopped beside the house and let Susan out while he went on to park the car. In a few moments he strode swiftly up from the carport holding a note. "It's from Maria," he explained. "She left it in the box where we keep the car keys because she knew I'd be sure to find it." He handed it to Susan. "It says you have a telephone message waiting for you on the hall table. Someone from San Francisco named Eric Bennett."

"Eric!" Susan came back to earth with a thud.

Gazing intently at her face, Larry arched one eyebrow quizzically. "Someone from your past?"

His voice sounded harsh, cold. "Or is it someone in your future?"

"I I " Susan stammered, resenting Larry's mercurial change of mood. "I don't know for sure." Immediately she regretted her answer, but she refused to identify Eric further. Larry certainly didn't talk about his involvement with Valerie McCauley. Unfortunately, because of the untimely, intruding phone call, the evening was spoiled. "Thank you, Larry. Thank you very much for a lovely evening."

He bowed formally and without smiling said, "You're very welcome." He walked swiftly away.

Susan hurried to the hall table, picked up the note, and went to her room before opening it. Perhaps Eric or his mother was ill. Suppressing a feeling of guilt for not having seen them before leaving town, Susan read the note. "Miss Nash, you are to call this number when you return, no matter what time it is."

Recognizing Eric's home telephone number, Susan threw her purse on the bed and dialed immediately. She must remember to pay the Scofields for this call. She didn't want to be indebted to her employer.

The phone at the other end of the line was picked up after the first ring. "Hello, Susan?"

The familiar voice sounded dear and stable to her, and a rush of wanting to see Eric almost

drowned her voice. "Yes, it's me! I got your message are you all right?"

"Yes, dear, I'm all right. And so is Mother."

"Oh! You had me worried!"

"Susan, I have a chance to come to Phoenix next week. The company picked up a new account, and they have a branch office out there that needs temporary help. I thought we might be able to get together."

"Oh, Eric, I do want to see you. But remember, I'm busy during the day."

His voice altered slightly. "And most of the night, too, judging from the time."

"You *would* call on the first night I've been out," Susan protested.

Eric's voice dropped to a whisper. "I've missed you very much. I didn't realize how much I needed you until all of a sudden you were gone. My days and nights have been absolutely empty."

"I'm sorry, Eric. I acted on impulse when I took this job, but perhaps it was for the best. We'll see."

"I have something very important to ask you when I get there. I'll call you from Phoenix, and we'll make the necessary arrangements to meet. Okay?"

"All right. Good night, Eric." Staring at the silent phone, Susan wondered how she had gotten so mixed up and confused lately. How could she have forgotten how kind and gentle and dependable Eric was? She had been honestly glad to hear

his voice. He said he missed her very much. Now he would probably come over and propose and want her to go back with him. Isn't this the way she had secretly hoped everything would turn out when she took this position? She knew she should be delighted, yet somehow she wasn't. Oh, one part of her was, but the other...

She walked into the bathroom, splashed cool water on her cheeks, and undressed for bed. Unable to sleep, she tossed and turned, wondering which Miss Nash to listen to—the one longing for mysterious, volatile excitement with Larry, or the sensible, calm Miss Nash ready to settle for a small apartment and the steady role of wife to a junior accountant? Besides, now there was Jay. How could she possibly leave him until his future was settled?

The insistent fingers of dawn were pushing the darkness out of the sky before she finally dozed off, fitfully, for a few struggling hours.

Susan awakened with an overwhelming sense of apprehension and reluctantly dragged herself out of bed. If she were in Braden's typing pool, she would have to be up and off to work whether she wanted to or not. Just because this job was more flexible, she still couldn't neglect her duties.

Glancing in the mirror, she asked her reflection, What am I afraid of? And the events of the night before came tumbling down around her in the clear white light of day. The perfect evening with

Larry—romantic, magnetic Larry—and then the jarring, perhaps even warning call from Eric—sensible, plodding Eric.

Every instinct advised her to accept Eric if he proposed and to get back to San Francisco—now, while she could still rationalize what was best for Susan Nash. But what about Jay, forlorn, lonely Jay? This was the hardest question she had to face in her mirror: Was she using Jay as an excuse to be around Larry?

No, her reason insisted. It was really very simple. She had an honest job to finish before she went back to the typing pool and Eric. Guiltily she realized she had put him last.

It didn't surprise Susan that everyone had gone when she arrived at the kitchen and found Jay chattering with Maria. His days were filling up with people, puppies, and horses.

Maria poured hot coffee, and they both turned at the sound of footsteps.

John Hazen appeared in the doorway, and Maria's eyes lit up. "What is it, my husband?" She gave him a warm kiss on the cheek and then noticed Susan's eyes widen in surprise. "You didn't know that I am John's wife?"

A telltale flush of pink covered Susan's face. "No."

Poking John playfully in the ribs, Maria nodded. "Today it doesn't matter that Mexicans marry the gringos." Gently sighing, she added, "Thirty years ago it was much different."

"Thirty years ago!" John said dryly. "What about just five years ago?"

"Oh, well," Maria retorted, "some people never learn. Especially stubborn old men."

John slapped her playfully on the backside. "My Maria, when will you stop biting the hand that feeds you?"

"Shush, my husband! I earn my keep around here."

The twinkle in John's eyes agreed with his wife's statement as he grabbed a fresh roll, ducked her sweeping hand, and left.

Underneath the banter Susan saw the bond of love between the older couple, but what was Maria's reference to a racial difference of just five years ago? The remark that it centered around a stubborn old man could refer to Mr. Scofield. He was undoubtedly the hand that fed them. Perhaps Craig, on the rebound from Maggie, had fallen in love with a beautiful Mexican girl and his father had put a stop to the marriage. Mr. Scofield would certainly demand a pure bloodline for his descendants. This could explain why Craig withdrew so often into his lonely, impenetrable shell. Susan toyed with the idea of asking Maria outright about it.

Jay innocently intervened. "What are we going to do now?"

"What have you done already?"

"Played with the puppies. Janet lets me see them every morning."

Startled again to realize that Jay must be getting up early each day, Susan decided she had better be more competent. A fine "watchdog" she was turning out to be! "Let's go swimming. Perhaps you can dive from the side this morning."

"Good!" Jay ran to get into his swimming trunks.

Susan put on her bathing suit and joined him at the pool. Touching his head, she exclaimed, "You really do need a haircut! Why don't I trim some of that off before you get it all wet?"

Jay frowned. "Aw, do we have to?"

"We have to. I just made up my mind. Meet me on the terrace." Susan hurried to her room, picked up a small pair of scissors, and went back and sat Jay down on a chair. "This won't take very long." She lifted the scissors and pulled a strand of hair out from his head.

"Stop that! Susan, what do you think you're doing?"

Startled at the sudden angry question, she turned to confront Larry. His expression was furious as he reached out and grabbed the scissors from her hand.

"I was about to trim Jay's hair." She tried to remain calm but felt frightened at Larry's unreasonable outburst, and also surprised that he was here on the ranch. "He does need a haircut—just take a good look at him."

Jay, trembling and white, jumped off the chair and hid behind Susan.

She hugged him and quietly said, "Go sit by the pool. I'll be there in a minute."

He scampered away, anxious to let Susan deal with Mr. Scofield.

"How dare you make such a scene over nothing!" Susan stormed. "Did you take a look at his face?" She wouldn't have been surprised to hear "You're fired, Miss Nash" next from Larry.

Instead, he ran his fingers through his own unruly hair and covered his face with his hands. The sudden anger had drained quickly away and left him defenseless. Anguish filled his eyes as he sat down and laid the scissors on the table. "I'm sorry, Susan." He stretched his legs out before him, fighting for composure. "I can't explain . . .not now. I—I—" Shaking his head, he got up and walked away, going down the hillside toward the distant stables.

Susan saw Carlos join him in a serious but animated conversation. Turning to go to Jay, she caught a glimpse of Maria watching from the kitchen and crossing herself with shaking fingers. Cold chills ran up Susan's spine.

Perhaps, Susan said to herself, Jay would be better off in San Francisco than here in an atmosphere that was so full of dark secrets.

CHAPTER VIII

Susan hurried to the pool where Jay sat dangling his feet in the water, his face looked unusually hot. "I don't want to go swimming." Tears filled his eyes. "I don't feel good."

"All right, let's sit in the shade and see how many birds we can spot up there in the rocks."

Smiling slightly, Jay brushed the tears away and lay down on a chaise longue, content to watch for birds landing on the scraggly bushes that were struggling to survive between the crevices of stone.

By the middle of the afternoon his hot forehead and burning eyes evidenced a fever. Susan took him to his room, gave him an aspirin, then sat beside the bed until he went to sleep. Feeling responsible for contributing to his illness because of her quarrel with Larry, she went to Maria and asked that a dinner tray be sent to Jay's room. The last thing she wanted to do was face the Scofields at the dinner table.

Jay awoke and reached for Susan's hand when he realized she was sitting beside him.

"Feeling any better?" Susan touched his forehead.

Jay shook his head, trying to hide the tears. "What's going to happen to me?"

"Nothing." Fluffing the pillow behind his head, Susan struggled to keep the tears out of her own eyes. "You'll be well in the morning."

"I mean, who's going to belong to me?"

"I don't know, Jay. I don't know, but we'll find out soon." Her voice broke and she swallowed hard. "I promise I won't leave you until we find out."

A quick tap on the door was a welcome interruption, and Maria came in with a tray of food. She insisted that Susan sit out on the patio in the fresh air and enjoy the crisp shrimp salad and iced tea while she looked after Jay. She coaxed him to eat most of his dinner, and Susan's spirits lifted when she heard him laugh.

"He'll be all right *mañana*," Maria predicted as she took the dishes away.

"Why don't you get into your pajamas," Susan said, "and we'll watch television together."

While Jay eagerly obeyed, there was another tap on the door, and Janet walked in with a squirming bundle in her arms. "Hi, buddy," she said. Her eyes searched Jay for signs of illness as she dumped a whining, fat puppy on the bed. "King wants to see you."

Squeals of delight from Jay brought a big smile to Janet's face. She turned to Susan. "I was worried about my buddy here. I had to come." The soft expression in her eyes when she gazed at Jay left little doubt in Susan's mind that he had made

at least one staunch friend out of the Scofield clan. It was all the more surprising that it would be Janet. If nothing else, the boy's pure delight in the puppy was a strong bond between them.

The door opened again, this time to admit Larry.

Jay tried to hide the small dog under the covers, and Janet's smile disappeared.

Susan watched the change of expressions and waited while Larry looked them all over. "Well, Janet, I'm surprised to see you here," he said.

"Why, for God's sake? I'm human, too, you know."

"I I didn't mean it that way. It's just nice to see your concern for Jay."

Gathering the protesting puppy in her arms, Janet said, "King and I will see you in the morning, buddy."

"Yes, ma'am." Jay sat stiffly on the bed and gazed up at Larry, waiting and wondering what was coming next.

"Do you like Janet?" Larry asked as he walked restlessly around the room.

"Yes, sir."

Thinking Larry would prefer to talk to Jay alone, Susan started to leave. He motioned her to stay.

"Jay, you're going to have to trust me a little longer. Believe me, I want what's best for you." He cleared his throat. "Do you like it here?"

"Yes, sir!" The tone of his voice left no doubt

that he wanted to firmly establish that he liked life on the ranch very much.

"Who are your favorite people?"

Jay hesitated. "I—I like Janet, Carlos, Maria, and John . . .and Lupe."

Susan listened to the questioning and wondered why Larry was putting him through it. Jay would still have to obey his final decision.

Walking over to the bed, Larry touched Jay's forehead to reassure himself that there was no need for a doctor. His hand caressed the boy's dark hair, and his voice turned husky, full of suppressed emotion, as he said, "Sleep tight."

The naked tenderness in Larry's manner drew tears to Susan's eyes. She would never understand this man who could be soft and tender one minute and sharp and hard the next. At least with Eric the road would run evenly, not through all these emotional hills and valleys.

Jay went to sleep early, and Susan made sure he was tucked in before she left his room to go for a walk.

The moon was just beginning to outline the jagged rocks behind the house as she started down the lane toward the iron gate. Her legs, stiff from sitting all afternoon, needed the exercise.

The small adobe houses in the distance threw flickering blobs of light out into the darkness, and the shouts of parents and the laughter of children drifted intermittenly over the slight breeze.

The question of what Larry was going to do with

Jay kept throbbing through Susan's mind. Why had he spoken so plainly tonight? It had frightened Jay. At times Larry tried to reach out to the boy, and at other times he withdrew, almost deliberately, from any contact with him. Why didn't he settle down, get married, and adopt Jay! Susan kicked a stone in the road. Miss McCauley would certainly scream at that a five-year-old boy to raise!

She wondered if Eric would consider the responsibility. No, there was something about Larry's demeanor around Jay that instinctively made Susan discard that idea. She knew Larry would never allow it, but she couldn't put her finger on the reason why.

Engrossed in her thoughts, Susan had walked farther from the house than she had intended. Turning around, she saw the mansion, high on the hillside, the lights and shadows making it appear eerie, almost frightening. She decided it was the grotesque rocks looming up in the darkness like prehistoric monsters on the prowl that produced such a threatening effect. She shivered, feeling victimized by the hovering black reflections. Suddenly she was in a hurry to reach the protection of her room, and she headed back up the hillside.

She left the winding driveway and cut through the desert landscaping toward the west wing of the house. Making little noise in her soft-soled shoes, she walked toward her bedroom patio. An odd

scraping sound floated toward her, and she moved instinctively to the shadow of the archway near the end of the patio. She held her breath and stood very still, straining to hear any unusual sounds.

From where she was standing, her room was in total darkness and the patio doors were invisible. With pounding heartbeat and trembling knees Susan waited and waited in the long, unending silence. I must have been wrong, she finally decided. I'm just tired and overwrought. She started forward once again, and the thick bougainvillea vine on the patio moved slightly.

No! She had been right. Someone was lurking there in the darkness. Her hand flew to her mouth to keep from crying out in fright. As she flattened her body against the wall, a hoarse whisper, barely audible, reached her straining ears. "Where's the boy? The boy . . .that's all that matters. . . ."

The rattle of the catch on the glass door satisfied Susan that it was locked. But why should anyone be hunting for Jay? Secretly. After dark. God, kidnapping! Was that it? Did someone intend to kidnap Jay, perhaps thinking the wealthy Scofields would pay a good price for his return? She had to get help. Where was everyone?

Susan turned to go back the way she had come and bumped into a rake leaning against the wall. It fell against the bushes and clattered onto the cement walk.

Involuntarily she shrieked, and the stealthy

figure on the patio melted around the opposite end of the house as she ran screaming into the kitchen.

Maria turned from the sink, and Larry and Craig came bounding in from other parts of the house.

Larry grabbed her by the shoulders and began shaking her, gently but firmly. "What is it, Susan? What is it?"

Great wrenching sobs shook Susan's body, and she kept pointing outside. The words stuck in her throat; she could only cry.

"She's hysterical, Craig." Larry put his arms around her. "Go outside and look around."

Craig bolted out the door as Maria pushed a master switch and floodlights illumined the outside.

The brilliant light calmed Susan enough for her to gasp, "Someone tried to get into my room!"

Maria poured her a cup of coffee, and Larry sat her down at the table. She realized he accepted her statement, for he nodded and asked, "Did you see who it was?"

"No. No, it was too dark."

Craig walked in. "There's no sign of anyone." He glanced at Susan. "Are you sure? It could have been the shadows playing tricks on you. There is a slight breeze blowing, too."

Susan pushed her damp hair off her forehead, feeling hot and feverish. Maybe she was coming

down with something. Maybe it was her imagination. Then, in a rush of remembering, she insisted, "No. I heard a voice whispering about the boy."

"What boy?" Craig asked.

"Why why, Jay, I suppose."

Craig raised his eyebrows incredulously. "Who on earth would be interested in that boy? It's preposterous!"

Susan accepted the tissue Maria was offering and dried the tears on her face. It did sound far out and senseless, she had to admit, but that was what she had heard.

Larry disappeared for a few minutes, then returned. "Jay's sound asleep. I searched your room thoroughly, so don't be afraid."

Maria untied her apron, folded it neatly, and laid it on the counter. "I go home to my husband," she muttered. "This is getting too scary."

"Maria," Larry pleaded, "don't mention this to anyone."

"I don't like it!" Maria's dark eyes flashed in anger. "My husband right this no good." Crossing herself and muttering ominously in Spanish, she hurried away.

"Larry" –Susan gripped his arm "I'm afraid for Jay. Is someone trying to kidnap him?"

Larry touched her cheek reassuringly. "Now, why should anyone be interested in Jay?"

Satisfied that Susan was going to be all right,

Craig awkwardly patted her shoulder. "Get a good night's sleep, Susan. This nightmare will disappear with the morning." He left the kitchen.

Susan still clung to Larry. "Do you think I'm crazy?"

His eyes sparkled as he tried valiantly to keep his mouth straight, before his face crumpled into a soft smile. "Forgive me, Susie. I don't want to laugh, but you look so adorable and so defenseless." He picked up her clenched fist, forcing her fingers to relax, and kissed her hand. "You need someone to look after you, do you realize that?" His dark head moved toward hers, and Susan responded to a tender kiss, as fragile as butterfly wings.

Then she moved away, drained by fear, confused by his exciting nearness, and remembering that Eric was coming soon. "I—I—" She looked up, and his eyes were mocking.

"Yes, I know," he said. "All those inhibitions are sweeping over you again." Touching her cheek lightly with his lips, he pushed her gently toward the door. "Go to bed, Susie. One of these days you'll stop running from yourself, and I'll be waiting."

Susan checked on Jay to satisfy herself that he was indeed safe and sound. A throbbing headache from so much excitement kept her from thinking about the attempted break-in. Perhaps Craig was right, and it would all seem foolish in the morning light.

CHAPTER IX

Susan awoke feeling surprisingly refreshed after last night's traumatic ordeal. The morning sun dispelled the shadows on the patio, and a tiny hummingbird darted in and out of the flower beds bursting with blooms. She lay in bed listening to the peaceful silence of a country day until the noisy alarm clock demanded immediate action.

Susan bathed, dressed carefully in a bright yellow and white print dress, and slipped into white sandals before checking on Jay. He was sound asleep, but his face had lost its high color. He would be fine. This happy thought made her hungry, and she hurried to the kitchen.

Mr. Scofield, drumming his fingers on the table, raised his shaggy brows and scanned her with questioning eyes as she walked in. "Good morning, Miss Nash. I trust you slept well after that harrowing experience last night."

Susan nodded, waiting. The old man wasn't here for a social visit. He was too busy for that. She smiled as Maria poured her a cup of coffee. "I hope you don't think I'm just a hysterical, easily frightened woman, Mr. Scofield." When he didn't answer immediately, she added, "Or that I'm just seeing things that aren't really there, as Craig suggested."

"No, Miss Nash, I don't think any of those things. That's why I wanted to hear your version of what happened while it was still fresh in your mind."

Maria silently brought scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast, then disappeared to another part of the house. Susan went over last night's events as precisely as she could remember them.

Scofield listened intently to every detail, interrupting occasionally to question her more thoroughly. It was obvious from his manner that he considered an attempt at breaking in a serious offense. "Are you sure you heard someone mention the boy?"

"I'm positive."

"Did they mention him by name?"

"No, they just said 'boy.'"

"Curious." He was deep in thought for several minutes before standing up. "Well, never mind, we'll keep the floodlights on at night. That'll put a stop to this foolishness." He nodded curtly and went on to more pressing business.

Susan continued with her breakfast. Her mind kept returning to Larry's personal remark about how he would be waiting when she lost some of her inhibitions. Curiously, Eric had never accused her of being inhibited. Which man was correct? Perhaps both . . .she reacted so differently to each of them.

Janet strolled in, looking for Jay. "Is he still sick?"

"No, I don't think so, but he needed some extra sleep."

"The dogs miss him." Janet tossed her Stetson on the counter, poured a cup of coffee, and sat down. She glanced warily at Susan several times before asking, "What's going to happen to him?"

"Jay? I don't know. Honestly. I guess Larry hasn't decided."

"What's there to decide?" Janet demanded. "He needs a home. It's just that darned simple." The high spots of color on her cheeks revealed how deeply she felt. "We could keep him here on the ranch. He'd be no bother."

"Have you suggested that to your brother?"

"No." Glancing over her shoulder, and satisfied they were alone, Janet confided, "Larry and I haven't been too close for the last five years. I I thought maybe you could sort of relay the message, let him know I'd be glad to take on the responsibility."

Maria walked in, and Janet hastily left before Susan could question her any further.

Although the attempted break-in was never discussed again, Susan stayed close to Jay. She felt it was important to know where he was every minute.

It was right after Jay had settled down one night

that the phone call came from Eric. Larry had answered, talked briefly, then motioned for Susan. "It's your boy friend from San Francisco." The mocking expression on his face angered her as he added, "Why don't you invite him out here as your guest?"

"I wouldn't dare!" As a hired employee, she was in no position to extend that kind of invitation. He must be teasing her again.

Larry kept his hand over the receiver, an impish grin on his face. "You're afraid."

"I am not. The idea is utterly ridiculous!"

Waving the phone away from her grasp, he continued. "But we have lots of room, you can still watch over Jay, and besides, I'd like to meet my competition." He spoke into the phone. "Mr. Bennett, this is Larry Scofield, and we would like you to stay here as our guest. That way you can renew your acquaintance with Miss Nash. I thought I'd extend you the invitation since she's rather a shy one, don't you think?" Larry handed Susan the phone, blew her a kiss, and walked out of the room.

The temerity of Larry's talking to Eric as if they were old buddies infuriated Susan. She tried to calm down before greeting Eric.

"Susan, dear, I've good news for you," he told her. "I'm in Phoenix, and I find I'll be able to check out this account and still have a few days for myself for us, I mean, to be together."

"But, Eric, I'm not free, you understand

that...and you wouldn't want to come out here."

"Why not?" He sounded surprised. "Your employer certainly gave me a personal invitation, and I can rent a car for a few days...unless, of course, you don't want to see me."

"You know I want to see you. It's just that I'll be busy with Jay, and I don't want you to be bored."

"That sounds like excuses, pretty flimsy excuses at that."

The edge in Eric's usually calm voice fanned the irritation Susan was feeling toward Larry. "All right, then come. Bring riding clothes, a bathing suit, and be my guest!"

"Good girl! Now, tell me how to get there, and I'll see you soon."

Susan gave Eric the directions and hung up. She had the eerie feeling of having talked to a stranger. He sounded so different from the rather stodgy man she had bowled with every Friday evening and had Sunday dinner with for over a year. On the other hand, perhaps she was giving too much importance to a phone call.

Meeting Larry in the hall, she snapped, "He's coming to visit, thanks to you."

"Good." His sultry eyes moved over her slender body and agitated face. "He's not worth your little finger if he's not willing to come and fight for you."

"Fight!" Susan wailed. "Larry Scofield, I've had enough! There'll be no fighting in this house. Do you hear me?"

"Loud and clear." He grabbed the hand

pointing at him and kissed it tenderly, that old-fashioned caress again. It just didn't fit his sophisticated manners. Here was a man who simply defied any particular mold, and she found this very upsetting.

Tossing her head in a defiant gesture, she went to her room. Eric was coming to a strange household, but it was his own fault. She had done her best to prevent it.

Maria had been alerted to the impending arrival of another guest. At breakfast the next morning she told Susan the girls had prepared a room for him in the other wing, near Craig and Larry. Her dark eyes appraised Susan in her green checked shorts. "Like flies to honey, my pretty one, you draw the men."

Susan turned red. "This won't work out. I just know it."

"You must choose sometime," Maria said. Patting her ample bosom, she added, "Listen with your heart. Always listen with your heart."

In the face of Eric's momentary arrival, Susan avoided Larry as much as possible. She was still angry that he had invited Eric, and angry, too, that Eric had accepted. Playing cat and mouse with two grown men was unthinkable. How could she properly choose either while they were both so near? I must be overreacting, she thought, since

neither man has offered me an actual proposal. For a moment she longed for the simple security of the typing pool at Braden's. At least if life had been dull then, it had also been uncomplicated.

Jay came from playing with the puppies to say that Carlos was getting the horses ready to ride. "I get to have a saddle today." Excitement shone in his eyes. "Do you want to go with us?"

"Of course I want to go. Let me get my riding clothes on."

"Hurry, hurry." Jay waited impatiently while Susan changed. They ran laughing and shouting down to the stables. Kolan came toward them, barking and jumping in the air, and Jay threw his arms around the dog and nuzzled his face in the heavy fur around his head.

Another friend, Susan thought, that will be taken from him when we go back to San Francisco. Jay's happiness was getting too rooted in people and things here. Larry should have made it clear to him that this was just a temporary visit, unless he planned to leave him. Susan vowed to talk to Jay at bedtime. It was dangerous for him to have lost his mother and then have this sense of belonging at the ranch torn away, too.

There was pride in Carlos's eyes as he watched Jay fit into the small saddle and put Skippy into a trot. "Come here, *amigo*." Carlos went to the tack

room and came back holding something behind him. Jay rode up and grinned shyly when Carlos set a new straw hat on his head. "Now," Carlos beamed, "you are a real cowboy!"

"Thank you, Carlos." Jay pulled it tighter on his head, and whirling Skippy around, galloped toward the gate.

Alarmed at the sudden speed from Skippy, Susan cried, "Jay, wait!"

Carlos chuckled. "Let him go, Miss Nash. He won't fall off as long as he stays on the road."

This ride into the desert was one of triumph for Jay. Carlos had adjusted the stirrups to his legs, and the saddle, trimmed with silver conchos, fit him perfectly. He sat tall on Skippy, viewing the cactus, searching for desert rabbits, and acting as if he owned every acre of the land. Every so often an irrepressible joy welled up in his throat, and he would yell, "Yippee, I'm a real cowboy now!" And with a flick of heels against the flanks of his horse, he would gallop off the trail, down a bare arroyo, sticking to the saddle as firmly as a cocklebur to fine wool.

Carlos watched carefully as Jay galloped circles around them. "He learns his lessons well, that lad." He grinned at Susan. "A true ranchman. See? He has a kinship with the desert, one that he'll never forget."

Susan was filled with pangs of regret that Jay had succumbed so completely to his new environment. Each day it was harder for her to see any solution to his happiness.

Carlos finally insisted they turn back, and when he offered to drive them up to the house after John took charge of the horses, she gratefully accepted. She was eager to wash off the dust of the desert before lunch.

She hurried around to the terrace and then stopped short in dismay. Eric Bennett sat at the table, fanning himself with the morning paper. Beads of perspiration had pasted his fine blond hair close to his head.

"Eric!" Susan rushed toward him, and he stood up and folded her in a big bear hug.

"Susan, Susan." Eric gave her a long, lingering kiss. "God, I've missed you."

The ardent greeting thrilled Susan. Either Eric had changed, or the separation had done them both good. "I've been riding. If I'd known when you were going to arrive, I'd have waited here for you."

Wiping his forehead with a wrinkled, damp handkerchief, he stepped back and looked her over thoroughy. "You're so brown. It certainly makes you look different!"

Susan laughed at the awkward compliment. Jay

came running up then, his boots clumping in the sand. "Jay, I'd like you to meet my special friend, Eric."

Jay extended his hand. "Howdy, sir," he said, and went bounding off to the kitchen.

Eric mopped his face again. "It's so hot here," he complained. "How do you stand it?"

"You'll get used to it," she promised. "This climate grows on you."

"Not on me it doesn't," he vowed. "I miss the sea breezes already."

Maria arrived to announce that lunch would be in a few minutes, and she showed Eric to his room while Susan freshened up and changed her clothes.

After a hearty meal of ham sandwiches, crisp lettuce salad, and fresh apple pie, Maria insisted on caring for Jay while Susan and Eric talked in the living room. They sat together on the red velvet davenport, holding hands.

"Susan!" Taking her face gently between his square blunt-fingered hands, Eric showered kisses on her forehead and cheeks and then crushed her lips in an urgent, possessive need. "I had planned to wait for a candlelight dinner, romantic music, and a full moon, but now I can't wait. Susan, come home and marry me. You must know I love you."

She dropped her face on his shoulder. Eric loved her, wanted her. He had finally proposed.

"Hey," Eric shook her a little. "Do you hear me?"

Quietly Susan got up and stood in front of the fireplace, looking up into the beautiful face of Larry's mother, stalling for time. The intense, almost hypnotic eyes in the painting seemed to be watching and waiting, like Eric, for her answer. "Yes, I heard you."

"Come back with me," he urged. "The boy will be all right here. He doesn't need you that much."

Susan turned back to him, keenly aware that she hadn't said she loved him. "A few moments ago you thought I looked different. I'm afraid it goes deeper than that, because I realize I'm thinking differently, too. Whether this will help or hurt our relationship, I don't know yet."

"Oh, Susan, don't turn philosophical. Be practical and marry me and get this -this oddball job behind you."

"All right, let's be practical. If we do get married, where will we live?"

Completely surprised at her question, he stammered, "Why—at my house, of course."

"With your mother?"

"Well, would you object?" He strode over to her. "You like my mother, don't you?"

"Of course I like your mother. But would moving in on her be fair? To her or to us?"

"I hadn't thought of any other arrangement. After all, Mother won't be with us too much longer . . . at her advanced age—"

Susan put her hand over his mouth. "I

understand that. But under the circumstances, let's wait until I do get back to San Francisco. Let's just think about it in the meantime."

Taking Susan by the shoulders, Eric searched her face. "You haven't said yes or no to my proposal." He let go of her, and fumbling in his pocket, held up a solitaire diamond ring. "I came prepared."

"Oh, Eric. This is so unlike you!" Susan stared at the sparkling ring. She was confused at the sudden turn of events and felt foolish for sparring with him instead of making a swift decision. "Please, let me think about it."

"Does this mean you don't love me?"

"No." Susan kissed him tenderly. "It means I want to wait until I get back home."

"Then come home with me now don't wait."

"I can't leave Jay until I'm sure of his future."

"Why does the boy's future mean so much to you? It's only a job." He searched her face. "Isn't it?"

"I I can't explain." Susan faced a scowling Eric. "Please be patient. I've been so mixed up lately, so confused inside. That's why I took this job, in order to get away from you and the typing pool. I had to think things through. The trouble is," she admitted ruefully, "I don't seem to have come to any clear-cut decisions."

Eric turned away, his hands clenched behind his

back. "Is there someone else? Are you falling in love with this Scofield?"

"I don't know . . .I don't know. I'm just trying to be honest." Tears welled up and spilled down her cheeks. "I don't want to lose you, Eric, but somehow I can't say yes. I need more time."

Eric dropped the ring back into his pocket and faced Susan. "Well, I guess there's nothing else for me to do, then, is there, but wait." His arm went around her waist. "Just don't forget that you're my girl." He kissed her again, and Susan sighed with relief that she had gained time. But time for what? If she was really in love with Eric Bennett, would she have needed time to say yes? Her heart would have said, Go. But this time her head said, Wait. And she waited.

Determined to put such a momentous decision aside for the time being, she said, "Come on, I'll show you around this place." Holding hands, they walked through the vast area of the mountaintop estate.

Eric was impressed but not overwhelmed at the Scofield style of living. "I wonder if they could use a good accounting firm," he mused.

Susan burst into laughter at his practicality. "Who knows? It will soon be time for dinner. Why don't you give Mr. Scofield your card?"

CHAPTER X

Susan took elaborate pains in dressing for dinner. A straight brown linen sheath seemed too severe. She exchanged it for a silk lavender dress, the color of her eyes, that clung softly to her slender form. Nervous and apprehensive about the evening ahead, she added the good strand of pearls and matching earrings that had belonged to her mother. Satisfied at last with her image in the mirror, she turned to leave as Jay burst into the room.

"Susan, Susan, I left my new cowboy hat down by the kennel gate." Tears began rolling down his cheeks. "I've got to go get it."

"Slow down, cowboy." Susan pushed the tangled hair off his forehead. "You don't have time before dark. Can't it wait until morning?"

"No! No!" he pleaded. "Something might happen to it." Impatiently he swiped at the tears with the back of his hand. "I've got to go get it tonight."

"I'll make a deal with you. I'll pick it up myself before I go to bed, and you can get it here in the morning."

"Promise? Carlos might not get me another one."

"I promise." Susan patted him lightly on his backside. "Go eat a good dinner and stop worrying."

The grandfather clock struck seven times as they gathered in the formal dining room. Introductions went smoothly and Eric met the three Scofield men on their own level, eye to eye and with a firm handshake. Larry sat at one end of the table, and Eric was seated next to Susan.

Craig winked at Susan as they waited for Janet, who was indulging in another of her unexplained absences. Mr. Scofield glanced at the clock several times, then impatiently ordered dinner to be served.

Larry's manners were impeccable. There was no outward sign that he was studying his competition, as he had told Susan he planned to do. Instead, the two men found much to talk about, especially business around the Bay area. Susan beamed with pride that Eric was doing so well, and she secretly hoped that Larry was sorry he had asked him to stay at the ranch.

Larry had just insisted they call each other by first names when Eric casually remarked, "One of our clients is the McCauley Shipping empire. I believe that you know Valerie?" Larry nodded and would have changed the subject, but Eric added, "In fact, didn't I read somewhere that you and

Valerie spent a summer together in wasn't it Spain?"

A slow, burning color traveled from Larry's neck through the crown of his curly hair. Everyone at the table stared at him and waited for his reply. Eric was the only one who continued to eat.

"I was there on assignment for *World Magazine*," Larry finally snapped. "Miss McCauley just happened to be there, too."

"Of course," Eric laughed. "I'm sure your meeting was purely accidental." His wide, innocent eyes traveled around the table. "I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to imply anything else!"

Stunned at his revelation and Larry's reaction to it, Susan looked at Craig, wondering if he would comment, but his eyes remained glued to his plate as if it were the only neutral territory in the room.

Mr. Scofield adroitly changed the subject to current events and questioned Eric about the high cost of living and how it was affecting business on the Coast.

Larry politely excused himself right after dinner. A few minutes later Susan heard a car spin its wheels in sand, then roar off down the hillside as if the driver was in a great hurry. Apparently Larry had decided that Phoenix was a more exciting or friendly place than here at home.

Craig joined Eric and Susan on the terrace. They were talking about a recent movie when she remembered Jay's hat and her promise to him.

"Please excuse me for a few minutes. I've an errand to do."

Craig and Eric nodded, and Susan went quickly down the lane toward the kennels.

Although the spotlights were turned on, the last few yards by the kennel fence were in darkness. Perhaps she would be unable to find the hat after all. Starting at the gate, she stooped down and began her search. It's funny, she thought idly, that Kolan hasn't started barking at me.

She passed under the shadow of the salt cedar tree by the corner of the fence, then jumped in fright as the front door of Janet's hideaway jerked open. She saw Janet standing in the flood of light, peering out into the night as if searching for someone.

She's heard me, Susan decided, and started out of the darkness to make her presence known. She stopped abruptly when a man walked around the corner of the house and gathered Janet in his arms. Kolan whined eagerly at his side. Susan got a quick look at his face before the door shut again, blotting out the light.

Astonished, unable to move, she blinked her eyes, trying to grasp the furtive scene she had just witnessed. No wonder Janet had reacted so violently when Susan had entered her place unexpectedly. She was hiding a man. The cunning way he had sneaked in just now told Susan that the rest of the family didn't know about it. So this was

why Janet had kept her father and brothers at a distance!

Suddenly frightened that Janet and the stranger might discover her presence, Susan whirled to go back to the house. She recalled how angry and violent Janet had become that other afternoon, and if Susan threatened their secret, this man could also be an overwhelming assailant.

She tripped over an object in the dirt and tumbled to her knees. Jay's hat rolled out in front of her. Grabbing it up, she ran back up the road, pausing under an orange tree to catch her breath before joining Craig and Eric. She was determined to look casual, as if nothing unusual had taken place.

The men stood up when Susan appeared, and noticing the high color in her cheeks, Craig excused himself. "I'm sure you two have lots more to talk about." Reluctantly he said good night.

Eric appeared tired from the long, hot day, and Susan, trying to hide the agitation she felt from seeing Janet with a strange man, used it as an excuse to say good night.

He kissed her tenderly and whispered, "I love you."

Susan hugged him for a minute, then went to her room and locked the door, a simple gesture that made her feel more secure. I won't think about Janet and her secret boy friend, she decided. It's strictly none of my business, and I'll be more

careful in going near the kennels. Shaking her head in amazement Janet Scofield, of all people—Susan turned on the yellow ceramic lamp beside her bed. The soft glow spotlighted a single red rose and a note lying on her pillow.

Breathing deeply of the pure fragrance of the flower, she read the note written in a strong masculine hand. "Longfellow said, 'There is nothing holier in this life of ours than the first consciousness of love the first fluttering of its silken wings—the first rising sound and breath of that wind which is soon to sweep through the soul, to purify or to destroy.'"

Susan's poetic heart raced madly as she sat down on the bed, enthralled. There was no signature. She was familiar with Eric's writing. This wasn't his. Could it be Larry's? Did he leave this poignant message before disappearing in the night? She walked out on the patio, holding the rose to her lips, wondering at the depth of Larry's love for her, for anyone. Valerie McCauley was very much a part of his life; he had not denied it. Perhaps his flirtation with me, Susan thought, is just to amuse himself until he gets back to her. There would be another photography assignment to fulfill somewhere in the world. Life as his wife would never lack excitement and glamour.

Caressing the rose, unwilling to put it down, Susan remembered Maria's advice: "Listen with the heart." Somehow it was much harder to listen

with the heart than she had ever imagined it would be. So many practical thoughts from the head tried to crowd out the more romantic, more idealistic feelings. For a long time she watched the clouds, touched with moonlight, sailing smoothly across the blue expanse of sky before she turned back and prepared for bed.

Slipping into her nightgown, Susan tucked the note under her pillow, but not before she had almost memorized its beloved message.

The next few days were hectic, trying to keep up with Jay and at the same time entertain Eric. She persuaded Craig to take them on a tour of the ranch. Eric and Craig were becoming good friends, while Larry remained aloof, although extremely polite.

Eric was persuaded to ride into the desert with them early one morning to see the changing moods of the plants and to watch the small animals at play. Jay pointed out the different kinds of cactus he had learned to identify. Very manly, he explained that Eric need not be afraid of the lizards running around in the sand and climbing up bushes and trees, but the rattlesnakes were to be left alone.

Shuddering at the mention of snakes, Eric was never able to relax until they got back to the stables and turned the horses over to John.

"Susan, you can't really like this kind of life," he protested as they walked back to the house. "Don't

you miss the fresh sea breeze drifting in, the gently falling rain?" He looked around the desert. "You'd have to long for rain in this constant dry heat."

"Yes, I think about the soft feel of a spring shower and how it touched my face," she admitted, "but I also like the clear, sunny view of smog-free air." She turned to him, hoping he would understand. "Have you ever wondered what it would be like to travel all over the world? To experience all kinds of weather and to meet all kinds of people, to be part of the exciting things happening around you?"

"No," Eric said quickly. Too quickly. Susan realized he longed only for San Francisco and to get back to the same familiar surroundings. But that wasn't wrong, either. Many people were happy to live out their lives with a sense of complete fulfillment in a small area of space and identity. But am I one of them? she asked herself. She knew these questions must be faced and answered honestly before she dared go in any direction.

The morning Eric had to go back to Phoenix, Susan was sorry to tell him good-bye. "I'll keep in touch," she promised.

"I'm not going to let you get away from me again." He kissed her. "Everything will return to normal when you get back home and we get married."

Shortly after the iron gate had clanged shut

behind Eric's car, Larry mysteriously appeared. Although the Scofield family had bid Eric a formal farewell last night, Susan had wondered if Larry would appear this morning.

Larry grinned, relieved that she was alone. "I thought the gentleman from San Francisco would never leave!"

"It was your idea." Susan's eyes snapped with satisfaction. "After all, you invited him here, remember?"

Clutching his chest as if he had been stabbed, Larry groaned, "Don't remind me. I seldom make mistakes, but when I do, they're big ones."

Laughing, irresistibly drawn to the clowning man, Susan touched his forehead. "Mmm, I think you'll live through it."

Larry pulled her into the circle of his arms, the touch of lightness gone, and crushed his lips against hers. For a moment she surrendered completely to the overwhelming emotion racing through her body.

Larry drew back, shaking and sober. "Don't do this to me, Susie."

Staring into his tormented eyes, Susan turned and ran to her room. All of a sudden two handsome men in her life, their kisses demanding answers. She couldn't think straight. She desperately needed time to try to evaluate what she wanted out of life, where she was going—before it was too late.

A reprieve, as far as Susan was concerned, came unexpectedly right after dinner, from the editor of *World Magazine*.

Larry spoke to him on the phone and then looked very seriously around the room. "My boss is on the spot. Our photographer in Brazil has broken his leg, and someone has to finish that assignment. They are already holding space for it in the next issue." Pausing, trying to get everything in perspective, he turned to his father. "Do you mind if I leave Susan and Jay here until I can get back?"

"Of course not. It's the only thing for you to do." Mr. Scofield cleared his throat, and his bushy eyebrows rose majestically over his twinkling eyes. "Miss Nash is a very pleasant edition to our dinner table."

Craig rose. "You get packed and I'll drive you into Phoenix. What about plane reservations?"

"They have made all the arrangements. All I have to do is be there by ten tonight." Larry hurried to his room.

Craig turned to Susan. "Would you like to ride in with us?"

"No," Susan declined. "I'd rather stay here. I've said too many good-byes lately."

Craig walked quickly out the door, his face inscrutable, and for a moment she regretted her decision.

Larry reappeared in a few minutes with his

suitcase, started over to Susan, and suddenly aware that his father watched his movements, checked himself. "I'll...see you in a few weeks."

Susan nodded as he disappeared into the night.

"Do you find my sons...interesting?" Scofield asked. Noting the embarrassed flush spreading over her face, he smiled. "Come, come, young lady, surely you can forgive an old man's natural curiosity."

In spite of his gruff exterior, Susan liked the patriarch of the Scofield clan. His native dignity and pride were reflected in all the fine surroundings. "Of course I like your sons, and I suspect you feel very deeply about your children."

Turning around slowly, he raised his eyes to the portrait over the fireplace. His gaze rested on the beautiful face looking down at him. "I've felt deeply, and at times too strongly, about every experience in my life." His shoulders straightened, and he glanced at Susan. "You should have known her, the bulwark of my existence." Misty-eyed, he looked back at the portrait of his wife. "My sons must know love as I've known it!" he vowed. "What is life without a vibrant woman beside you? I can answer that—it's nothing! Larry, rushing around the world what does he prove? That he's a good photographer? Craig, building his cattle empire and growing better crops what does he prove? That he's a good farmer?" Scofield snapped his fingers. "They've missed the vital part, the

heart and soul of life...the right woman and children on the way. Children, then grandchildren, the seed of continuing life."

"You have a daughter," Susan gently reminded him. "Perhaps she will give you grandchildren."

A curtain fell over his expressive face, and sadness deepened the lines around his eyes. "Perhaps...perhaps." He walked slowly out of the room without saying good night.

Susan turned out the lights and went to her room. Reaching into the dresser, she found the note that had been left so mysteriously on her pillow and read it again.

Longfellow and Mr. Scofield must have experienced that consciousness of true love that swept the soul. Perhaps it would come to her, too. She fervently hoped she would recognize it and have the courage to reach out and clasp it in her arms. But would it purify or destroy her soul? That was the question that needed to be answered.

CHAPTER XI

The days passed swiftly, and in spite of Larry's absence, Susan began to feel part of the family.

Craig took a steady interest in Jay, teaching him the ways of the mysterious desert. Patiently he explained how the scorpion's sting was quick and sometimes deadly, and delivered with one flip of his narrow tail. He warned him again to beware of the rattlesnakes—he called them sidewinders—lurking in the rocks as the days became hotter.

Jay responded to the loving attention and followed Craig around, imitating him and frequently getting in the way, but learning valuable lessons.

Mr. Scofield drove them to the fields to see the cotton, growing tall and thick and putting on pale yellow squares as the irrigators ran water down the rows. "It looks like three or four bales to the acre this year," he predicted, "but until it's in the gin, you can't count on it."

Jay was growing tall and sturdy and deeply tanned, and his dark hair was long and, in places, burned by the hot sun. Susan decided one morning to trim it. This time Larry wasn't around to stop her.

"After we get back from riding," Jay begged. "Please?"

She relented. "All right. But then I'll get the scissors."

They walked down to the stables where Carlos was waiting with the horses already saddled. "You're late, *amigo*," Carlos said. "Skippy is getting restless."

Jay ran up and patted Skippy's nose. "We'll race you, Carlos." He jumped around impatiently until Carlos boosted him into the saddle.

"Slow down," Carlos warned, "until we get out into the desert."

Eager for a race, Jay reined Skippy sharply around the side of the tack room and headed across the rocky plateau instead of keeping to the road.

"Whoa!" Carlos yelled. "Stay out of the rocks." He turned to Susan. "He knows better than that." Carlos mounted Lucky Dot and galloped after Jay to force him back on the road.

Frightened at Jay's carelessness and fast pace, Susan watched Carlos shorten the distance between the horses.

Jay glanced back, and thinking Carlos wanted to race, kicked Skippy to go faster. The excited horse, galloping toward a cluster of jagged rocks, attempted to jump over them.

Instead of clearing the boulders, Skippy's steel shoe caught on a sharp, protruding piece of rock.

The horse screamed and flipped sideways, flaying all four legs in her futile effort to keep from falling.

Catapulted out of the saddle with tremendous force, Jay fell in the middle of the rough, needle-sharp boulders. Skippy scrabbled to her feet and, scared and riderless, raced wildly on. Jay lay where he fell, crumpled and still.

"Jay! Jay!" Susan screamed hysterically, and started running on foot toward him.

A truck screeched to a halt beside her, and Mr. Scofield flung open the passenger door. "Get in. I saw the whole thing."

Susan scrambled into the truck, and Scofield roared over the rough ground. "Any idiot knows a horse can't gallop through those rocks! Why did Carlos let him go through there?"

"Don't blame Carlos. He told Jay to keep to the road, but Jay was in such a hurry to race that he didn't hear."

The pickup halted by the inert body of the boy as Carlos galloped up and jumped off his horse.

Susan rushed to Jay, lying unconscious in a puddle of blood. "God, my God," she moaned. "Jay! Jay!" Kneeling beside him, she cried, "What shall we do?"

"Get that horse blanket out of the back, Carlos," Scofield commanded. "We'll cradle him on it and lay him flat in the pickup bed and get him to the house."

The men worked swiftly, and Susan climbed in

the back and held Jay while they drove carefully up the lane. As Scofield pulled up beside the house Carlos jumped out, yelling, "Maria, Maria, there's been an accident! Call the doctor in Compton and tell him to get out here pronto!"

Maria ran out, looked at the still body held in Susan's lap, and disappeared back into the house, praying.

"How long will it take for him to get here?" Susan asked, noting the grave expression on Scofield's face.

"Long enough! In the meantime, let's get him inside and cleaned up a little."

Tenderly they lifted Jay with the blanket. Susan ran ahead, turned down his bed, and lay several bath towels on the pillow. Jay's face, gray-white through the summer tan, was splotchy with drying blood.

"Get a pan of cold water," Scofield said. "Let's get some of this off."

Carlos removed Jay's boots and unbuttoned his shirt.

Slowly and carefully, they washed the dirt and blood off Jay's scratched face. Scofield held his head as Susan pulled his hair back to sponge behind his ear. Rubbing a brown stain that ran about two inches from his ear toward the back of his head, she remarked, "That's not blood. It's either a bruise or a birthmark."

Susan glanced up at Mr. Scofield. His face had

turned ashen gray, and his deep-set eyes were glazed with shock. Transfixed, staring down at Jay's head in his hands, the man began gasping for breath.

Carlos heard the labored breathing, took one look at Scofield's face, and forced him to let go of Jay. Bewildered, he glanced at Susan. "Is the boss having a stroke?"

"I don't know—he suddenly just went into shock." She pushed a chair in front of the open window. "Help him over here—give him air."

Carlos almost carried Scofield to the chair.

"What is it?" Frightened, almost speechless, Susan tried to keep her teeth from chattering. "Mr. Scofield, can you talk to us?" She grabbed his shaking hands as he slowly looked from her to Jay's helpless form and back to her, trying to talk.

Carlos shook the man. "Please, sir, what is it?"

He couldn't answer. Carlos turned to Susan. "Let's get him to his room and wait for the doctor." He tugged at Scofield, trying to get him back on his feet.

"No!" Scofield came suddenly alive and broke loose from Carlos, yelling, "No! Oh, my God, no!" He turned to Jay and peeled the boy's hair back from his head, staring closely at the dark spot, rubbing it under his thumb. "Look"—he moved his hand—"what does that look like to you?"

Puzzled, Carlos and Susan bent closer. Carlos

half smiled through his fear. "Why, it's a perfect outline of a—a scorpion." Embarrassed at the remark, he added, "But, of course, it isn't."

"It's a birthmark," Susan insisted. "That's all it is."

The color returned in a rush to Scofield's white face, and his eyes turned black with anger. "Yes, it is a birthmark, Miss Nash." His voice was strong and commanding once again. "You heard what Carlos said. It looks like a desert scorpion."

"Sir, don't listen to me." Carlos flushed, "That came first to my mind as I looked down at it. I said it before thinking."

Scofield sat down on the bed next to Jay and looked searchingly at the inert little body. "Carlos," Scofield said in a measured voice, "this boy is my grandson!"

Carlos almost staggered as he turned and grabbed the headboard of the bed for support. "What are you saying, sir?" he whispered.

Susan felt as if someone had just hit her in the stomach with a sledgehammer. Scofield had lost his mind; there was no other reasonable explanation.

"I'm telling you—here!" Scofield pushed his white hair flat against his head and spread it apart at the same place where Jay's birthmark was located. "Look for yourself!"

Susan and Carlos stared at the mark on

Scofield's head. A brown scorpion, exactly like the one on Jay. Unable to believe her eyes, Susan gasped. Carlos cursed softly in Spanish.

Scofield turned to Susan. "All right, young lady, what do you know about all this?"

"Why, nothing. I I know nothing!" She knelt beside Jay, wishing the doctor would hurry. Glancing at the clock on the table, she was surprised to see that it hadn't been very long since the accident; it only seemed like hours. She rubbed Jay's limp hand, trying to ignore Mr. Scofield as he walked the floor like a madman.

"Jay Scofield, not Jay Lucerno," he barked. "Do you know what this means? Lawrence has been lying to all of us! His own son, *my grandson*, and he's trying to hide it! Well," he snorted, "blood will tell! In this case, a birthmark. That's an inherited mark in my family usually shows up in every other generation." He pointed at Jay. "There it is!"

Carlos straightened his shoulders. "Sir, I think you're wrong. This boy isn't Larry's son."

"Don't try to tell me I'm crazy," Scofield yelled, "because I'm not. I know I know!"

Jay stirred, moaning, and Susan placed a cold washcloth on his forehead. "Please," she pleaded, "let's be quiet."

"Go see where that doctor is, Carlos," Scofield demanded. "Nothing's too good for my—this boy!"

Carlos hurried away, obviously relieved to be out of the room.

Susan tried hard to keep from thinking about Larry and Jay and Scofield's insisting that this boy was his grandson. It couldn't be. Larry wouldn't do this to Jay, or to his father...or to me, she thought. Her mind refused to accept this -this birthmark thing. It sounded too much like black magic, or voodoo, or something just as frightening. Tears poured down her cheeks as she stroked Jay's hand, wishing desperately that the doctor would hurry up and get here.

Scofield stood staring out of the window, muttering. "I can't understand Lawrence. Why? Why? We haven't been close, but family ties are stronger than this. Why didn't he tell me? He knows how much I've wanted a—" He whirled around. "Have you ever heard him mention a wife?"

Larry with a wife? Susan shook her head. She couldn't accept the idea of his ever having been married. What had he called Jay's mother? Wasn't it Olivia? She scanned the corners of her mind for any hint that he might have dropped. There was nothing. Suddenly she remembered the incident when she had started to cut Jay's hair and Larry had been so violently opposed to it. A sickening suspicion poured over her that Larry was, after all, keeping this birthmark from everyone. He had a very good reason to keep Jay's hair long. He was

covering up something. If it hadn't been for this accident, they would never have known. Anger such as Scofield was expressing lodged in her heart against the man who would deny this innocent child his heritage. Automatically she rubbed her hand across her mouth, trying to erase the memory of his kisses. Eric was right: she was too naive for her own good. Well, not any more! She would get back to San Francisco as soon as Jay was well again. She wouldn't be needed here – now that Larry's dark secret was out in the open.

"Susan," Jay whimpered. "Susan?"

"Yes, Jay, I'm here."

His dark eyes pleaded. "I hurt."

"I know, honey. The doctor is coming, and you'll be all right."

"How's Skippy?"

"She's fine."

"I didn't mean to fall. Is Carlos mad at me?"

"Of course not."

Mr. Scofield leaned over the bed. "How are you, boy?"

"It hurts, sir."

Scofield touched Jay's forehead, then straightened up as Maria brought Dr. Marshall into the room.

"Hi, Tom. Maria tells me there's been an accident." Dr. Marshall felt Jay's forehead. "Is he one of your hired hands' kids?"

"No," Scofield thundered. "This child is "

Susan stepped in front of Scofield. "His name is Jay Lucerno, and he's a guest here. I'm his friend looking after him until his guardian returns." She pushed Scofield toward the door. "Let's get out of here while the doctor examines Jay."

Scofield did not object, and Susan shut the door behind them.

"Don't you think it would be wise to keep quiet about all this until Larry returns?" she asked. "We don't want Jay upset."

Mr. Scofield studied her for a moment, then nodded. "All right, until Lawrence returns. But no longer."

CHAPTER XII

Susan sat in her room waiting for the doctor to finish examining Jay, refusing to accept the possibility that the boy was a Scofield. It just didn't make sense. Surely the mark of the scorpion could be explained satisfactorily. Right now it was more important that Jay had no grave internal injuries. The gash on the back of his head would have caused the loss of blood.

The minutes dragged interminably on. Finally, unable to sit still any longer, she went out in the hall and paced in front of the closed door, wishing that Larry were here to explain everything to his father. There must be a logical reason for all this.

The door opened and Dr. Marshall walked out, closing it softly behind him.

"How is he, Doctor?"

"He'll be all right, eventually." He glanced around. "Where's Tom?" He touched Susan's arm as they walked down the hall. "If I remember that man, he's in the kitchen drinking coffee and waiting for us."

Sitting alone at the kitchen table, Mr. Scofield looked up as they entered.

Susan poured the doctor a cup of coffee out of

the carafe on the table, anxiously waiting as he stirred cream into the steaming hot liquid. His bald head glistened in the light as he sipped it, testing its hotness.

"That boy is terribly bruised and cut up from the rocks," he said at last, "but there are no broken bones and no internal injuries. Keep him quiet for a few days, and he'll be as good as new." He glanced at Scofield. "Go on back to work, you old cuss. You act as if you'd run over him with your own truck." The doctor winked at Susan. "We go back a long, long way, don't we, Tom?" His face sobered abruptly. "In fact, we've been through an awful lot good times as well as bad."

"Yes," Scofield admitted, "you've delivered all our children, and you helped my Delila through her last days. I guess I can trust you with my this boy."

Dr. Marshall's eyebrows raised above his glasses, and he looked sharply at Scofield. "I've never lied to you, Tom. This boy will be all right."

"I know, Bill." Scofield walked out with his arm around the doctor's shoulders, and Susan hurried back to Jay.

He looked at her from under a turban of bandages, and his big eyes were desolate. "I guess I can't go swimming for a while."

"No. You can't go riding, either."

"What can I do?" Moving his legs impatiently, he cried out with pain.

"Does that answer your question, young man? You're going to lie still until the cuts heal." Susan kissed him on the cheek. "Right now I want you to take a long nap."

Jay blinked sleepy eyes as Susan drew the draperies to darken his room. She slipped quietly out and collided with Mr. Scofield.

"How is the boy?"

"Taking a nap."

"Here." He thrust a piece of paper into her hand. "Get this telegram off to *World Magazine* and ask them to send it on to Lawrence."

Susan read the short message: "Your son injured in accident. Come home at once. Thomas Scofield."

"Isn't that a bit strong?" Susan protested. "You don't know that Jay is Larry's son, and the accident wasn't that serious."

"He should be here right now to explain this damned situation. Good Lord, I expect a son of mine to act like a man and present this boy as he truly is." His lined face looked extremely tired, as if the last few hours had drained him of much-needed vitality.

"Please, Mr. Scofield, I beg you to tell no one, not even Janet and Craig, until Larry is here to defend himself."

The stubborn set of his chin finally yielded to Susan's plea. "Maybe you're right. But I won't be denied my grandson. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, I hear you, loud and clear!" Susan patted his arm. "There's nothing I'd like better than have Jay turn out to be your grandson. He certainly needs a good home." Impulsively she stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek.

Scofield's eyes misted as he cleared his throat and walked swiftly away.

Susan went to look for Maria, to tell her about Jay, and found her by a tiny shrine in the garden, praying.

"It's all right, Maria." Susan's arms went around her. "Jay's going to be just fine."

"Thank God, thank God," Maria said fervently. "That poor little *niño*. Carlos ran out of his room like he'd seen a ghost—I think the boy must be dying!"

"We've got to keep him quiet for a few days." They walked back to the house. Carlos stood by the door, twisting his hat in his hands.

"How is Jay?" There were dark circles under his eyes.

Susan smiled. "He'll be okay."

"Carlos!" Maria exploded into Spanish, gesturing and scolding him for letting this happen. In English she said, "I go fix you both something to eat."

"She's just upset," Carlos explained. "We all like the little fellow so much, we hurt when he hurts."

"I understand." Susan turned pleading eyes on him. "Please, Carlos, don't tell anyone what Mr.

Scofield said about Jay about that odd mark on his head."

"No, ma'am." Carlos looked angry. "I tell no one. Besides, it isn't true. Sco, I mean Larry, is not Jay's father." He tapped his forehead. "I know. This is not true, Miss Nash."

"Yes." Susan wanted to believe that Carlos was right, until she remembered again how terribly upset Larry had become over Jay's haircut. "I asked Mr. Scofield to remain silent, too, until Larry is here to defend himself."

"*Sí, sí.*" Carlos relaxed when Maria bustled in with a platter of her good cooking. "I'm glad John has gone to Phoenix on an errand," she said. "He'd say this accident was a bad omen, too."

Susan laughed. "You're all too superstitious. Jay is going to be fine."

Thomas Scofield waited a few days until Jay was able to be up and around. Dr. Marshall had come and treated his wounds and removed most of the bandages. and Susan was reading him a book. Scofield looked in. "Are you feeling better, my boy?"

"Yes, sir."

Scofield cleared his throat several times. "I I have something out on the patio for you. Would you like to see it?"

Surprised at the extra attention he was getting since the accident, Jay looked inquiringly at Susan. She nodded and put the book down.

Outside, a red bicycle, resting on its own kickstand, waited for Jay's approval. "For me, sir?" Jay looked earnestly up at Scofield. "Are you sure it's for me?"

"Of course I'm sure. I bought it for you myself." He grinned down at Jay. "This won't buck you off. Can you ride a bicycle?"

"No, sir." He touched the handlebars and whispered in awe, "Is it really mine to keep?"

"It's all yours."

Susan smiled as Jay continued to walk around the bicycle, touching the seat, the handlebars, and saying, "It's neat!" He went over to Mr. Scofield and held out his hand. The old man bent down. They shook hands, and Jay said, "Thank you very much, sir."

Jay mended rapidly and counted the days until he could learn to ride the bicycle. In the meantime, Mr. Scofield made it a daily habit to take him out in the truck. It was a source of great joy to the man that Jay never got tired of going around the farm with him. Sometimes he would fall asleep from sheer exhaustion, and Scofield would carry him tenderly to his room.

Susan's heart ached for them both. If Larry came back and proved to his father that Jay was a Lucerno, not a Scofield, it would destroy the old man, for he was convinced the boy was his grandchild.

Scofield's new interest in Jay puzzled Janet and

Craig. Janet tried to shrug it off, accepting Jay at the kennels to play with the puppies, but ignoring him the rest of the time.

Craig finally asked Susan to meet him for a late-evening swim, for the express purpose of questioning her.

After adjusting the straps on a new bathing suit, one that Maria had found in the bath house, Susan appeared at the pool. Craig's eyes lit up with approval.

"You're one hell of a woman, Miss Nash, do you know that?" His eyes sparkled with a man's appreciation of feminine beauty as he looked her over. "Tell me, who has the inside track on your affections -my wandering brother or the more dependable Eric Bennett?"

"Neither," she answered demurely. "I have recently decided to renounce all men."

"That'll be the day." Craig tossed her in the pool and dived down beside her. They came to the surface sputtering and laughing, playfully chasing each other.

An accomplished swimmer, Craig dived off the board, barely stirring the water as he went in. Susan joined him, and they swam the length of the pool several times before climbing out, breathing heavily from the strenous exercise.

Susan reached for a towel and dried the water off her hair. "Thanks, Craig. I didn't realize how much I've been sticking with Jay."

Craig turned off the bright overhead lights and lay down beside her on the towel. The underwater lights bathed the night around them in a soft, peaceful glow.

"Susan, what's happened to my father? He acts at times as if he's just discovered a gold mine."

"I I don't know what you mean."

"I think you do. Somehow I get the feeling that everything's changed since Jay had that accident. I tried to dismiss it as my imagination, until I learned that Janet feels it, too. She asked me today what brought on this new attitude." He ran his fingers through his damp hair and waited for her reply.

Susan remained silent, and Craig leaned over, looking stern. "Has Larry pulled some kind of a trick on Father?" The muscles jerked in his neck. "I wouldn't like it if he has."

Susan touched Craig's arm and felt him tense as he leaned nearer. For a moment she wondered if he was going to kiss her. Then he drew back, and she decided *her* imagination was working overtime. "Why does it seem so odd to you and Janet that your father wants to devote his time to a little boy who so obviously likes his company?" She spread her hands out. "It looks perfectly normal to me."

Craig searched her face, trying to read beneath its surface. "Because my father hasn't given any child a second glance for over five years. Oh, he harps about his lack of grandchildren, but he's

spending all his time with Jay. What's changed him?" When Susan didn't answer, he shrugged. "Either you don't know, or you aren't going to say. It looks as if I'll just have to wait until Larry returns." He stood up and pulled Susan to her feet. "Any idea when that will be?"

"The last postcard just said soon."

Craig walked Susan to her door, and she reached up and kissed him on the cheek. "If I had a brother, dear Craig, I'd want him to be just like you."

Craig turned away without replying, still disturbed at her apparent refusal to level with him.

Susan looked in on Jay, who was sound asleep. Then she undressed and went to bed.

The exercise and the cool swim put her to sleep immediately, and the stealthy footsteps in the night did not disturb her.

CHAPTER XIII

It was nearing daybreak when the hot, sultry storm struck the Valley with such force that Susan, half asleep, half awake, wondered if she were in the middle of an earthquake.

She ran to look outside. The patio was in total darkness except for the stabbing flashes of lightning that bathed the land with an eerie glow. The roaring wind tore limbs from trees and vines from the garden, to hurl them across the open desert. Thunder shook the windows as she groped for the bedside light and tried the switch. There was no electricity. Feeling her way carefully to the closet, she found a robe just as the sky split open and sheets of water pounded against the side of the house. Lightning struck the rocks, and Susan cried out in terror at the tremendous explosion. Poor Jay, he would be scared to death, she thought. She moved toward his room as someone began pounding on her door.

"Susan, wake up!" Craig's voice was almost lost in the uproar. "The lights are out—I have a candle for you."

Fastening her robe with trembling fingers, Susan flung open the door. "Oh, Craig, help me get to Jay!"

Fully dressed, Craig strode in with a candle protected by a glass chimney, and took Susan's hand. They hurried to Jay's room.

Susan walked over to the bed, saying, "Honey, don't be afraid." As she touched the bed a flash of lightning flooded the room. The covers were thrown back. The bed was empty. "Jay?" Susan's voice quivered as fear clutched her throat. "Where are you?"

Craig held the candle high, and Susan searched the room. "Craig! He isn't here!"

"Now, don't get hysterical; he's probably hiding." Handing her the candle, he looked under the bed and in the closet. "Jay, come on out...there's nothing to be afraid of." There was no sign of the boy. Craig pushed Susan in front of him into the hall. "Maybe he got scared and ran to some other part of the house."

Mr. Scofield came toward them with a flashlight. "What's all the commotion?" He glanced around. "Where's the boy?"

"I don't know. Have you seen him?"

"Of course I haven't seen him, or I wouldn't be asking you."

Frightened, and remembering that someone had already tried to kidnap the boy, Susan ran back to his room, screaming, "Jay! Please answer me!"

The only sound was that of the constant, rampaging storm.

Mr. Scofield came back with two more powerful lights. "We'll search every inch of this house. He's got to be here somewhere."

They searched every room, the flashlights erasing the darkness with long, spiraling beams, but there was no trace of the boy.

Returning to Jay's room, Craig asked, "Where are his clothes? The ones he took off tonight?"

"Why, there." Susan turned the light on a chair near the bed. The empty chair threw long shadows on the wall.

"Are you sure they were on that particular chair?"

"I'm positive." Susan's face paled under Craig's question. "I noticed them when I checked on Jay after our swim."

"Well, it's empty now." Craig moved the chair to be sure the clothes hadn't fallen on the floor. "They're gone."

Susan's crying brought the men to her side, and Craig put his arm around her. "Don't worry, we'll find him."

The rain drummed relentlessly against the windows. "But how? You can't search for him in this downpour."

Turning the light in all directions, Mr. Scofield swore softly. "All tracks will be erased, too, from the storm. Come on, let's go to the kitchen. There's nothing we can do now until morning."

They lit candles in the kitchen, and Susan boiled

water on the gas range to make a pot of coffee. She stared out the rain-pelted window, watching the flashes of white lightning while the men remained silent. Poor Jay, poor Jay, she thought. Where is he? Maybe there's a note in his room that we've overlooked.

"Do you think it's money?" Her voice sounded harsh and raspy. "Is someone holding Jay for ransom?"

Mr. Scofield pounded his knuckles on the table. "I don't know, but I'll get to the bottom of this," he vowed.

The rain began to abate when daylight finally thrust its shaky light over the horizon.

John Hazen stomped in through the door, holding an umbrella over Maria.

Mr. Scofield helped them out of their raincoats. "Have either of you seen anything...irregular around here tonight?"

"The storm." John shook the rain off his hat into the sink. "Isn't that enough? This is the worst gully-washer I've ever seen."

"No, I mean anything else." He shook his fist. "We can't find the boy."

"Jay?" Maria's incredulous whisper filled the room as if she had shouted. She looked around, bewildered. "The *niñito*? Where would he go?"

"We don't know," Craig answered. "But he isn't in his room." He glanced at Susan. "I think it's light enough to search again."

Susan followed Craig down the hall. They searched every nook and corner of his room. There was no sign of a struggle, no ransom note. "Check his closet see if there's a jacket missing."

Susan searched carefully. "There's nothing gone."

"That means he was taken before the storm hit."

"But why?" she wailed. "Why?"

Craig frowned. "When we have the answer to that, maybe we'll have the answers to a lot more questions."

They went back to the kitchen. Maria, moaning and crying, cooked breakfast while everyone sat around glumly, waiting for the storm to taper off.

Somewhere, Susan thought, Jay Lucerno, or Jay Scofield, was being held for some unknown reason, and money was the only thing that seemed logical. But why, then, wasn't there a note giving them instructions? Longing for Larry to be home to help shoulder this terrible burden, Susan cried, praying desperately that Jay wouldn't be harmed.

As soon as the downpour became a drizzle, the men hurried out to search the grounds. The damage inflicted by the storm had been extensive. The phone lines were down, the electricity was cut off, and the house, sitting on the rocky hillside, was surrounded by high water. They were unable to find any evidence or clue as to what had happened to Jay.

"Don't worry," John comforted Susan. "The

heat will dry this water up in a hurry, and then I'll go into Compton and report this to the sheriff."

Susan sighed. There was nothing she could do but wait.

Susan wandered around the house, looking for any tangible evidence that might have been missed. The men went in and out, trying the lights and checking to see if the phone had been restored to service.

It was almost noon when John hurried in. "There's a car stopping on the other side of the gate. Whoever it is won't be able to drive across that stream of water."

"We'll take the jeep and go down," Craig said. "Let's hope this is the break we've been waiting for."

Susan walked the floor. The time seemed endless before the jeep crawled slowly back up the road. She rushed out as Mr. Scofield hurried from around the house. They met Larry crawling out, his pants rolled above his knees, and holding his shoes in his hands.

"Larry!" Susan cried. "Thank God you're home—but -how?"

"I got into Phoenix late last night, just about the time the storm struck. The phone was out, so I rented a car." Larry looked tired and very serious, and Susan realized he had been filled in on the kidnapping.

"Then you know about Jay." He nodded, and she cried, "I'm sorry, it's my fault. I should have heard any disturbance."

"Don't be silly." He turned to his father. "Where's Carlos?"

"Why, I don't know. I suppose he's out checking on the damage. Why?"

Larry turned to Hazen. "Find him, John, and bring him here at once."

Craig studied his brother's face and then looked at his father glaring sternly at him. "I'll go with John." He handed Larry his suitcase and crawled back into the jeep. "This may take a while; depends on the condition of the road."

Mr. Scofield motioned Larry and Susan to come into the house. "Lawrence, I want to see you and Miss Nash in my study . . . now."

Noting the serious expression on his father's face, Larry nodded. "Let me get out of these wet clothes first."

Susan walked into the study. Mr. Scofield stood in front of the window, his back to the room, his hands clasped behind him. He waited there, stiff as a ramrod until Larry stepped in and quietly closed the door.

Mr. Scofield turned around, his piercing eyes fastened on his son. "Much has happened since you went to Brazil. For one thing, I have made the important discovery that Jay Lucerno is my grandson. What do you say to that?"

Visibly shaken by his father's unexpected announcement, Larry stuttered, "How—how—why do you say that?"

"Why not admit it? Is it not true?"

Completely overwhelmed by the impact of his father's question, Larry merely stared, unable to answer.

"Come, now," Scofield snapped. "I am highly disappointed that a son of mine hasn't the courage to admit he has a son—my grandson. I want some straight answers from you, Lawrence. Who was the child's mother? Someone you met in Spain or Italy or wherever you happened to be at the time? Didn't you marry her? Is that the reason for all this secrecy?"

"Father, as God is my judge, Jay Lucerno is not my son."

"How dare you deny it! I can prove that he is by the birthmark on the back of his head. The stamp of the scorpion has been a Scofield mark for generations." The old man was unable to keep the triumph out of his voice.

Larry looked at Susan, his eyes searching her face for understanding.

She stepped toward him and put her hand on his arm. "While you were gone, Jay was thrown from his horse. Your father and I cleaned the blood off his head and found the mark quite by accident."

"Who else knows about this? Craig? Janet?"

"No one else except Carlos. He was there when your father discovered it. I implored your father to keep the secret until you returned to explain." Susan's voice faltered, then she went on. "I just felt you could explain, that's all."

"Father, Jay is not my son." Larry begged for time. "Will you trust me? I "

"No, by thunder! Trust is one thing. Making a man out of you is quite another. What can possibly be gained by waiting? Jay is my grandson, I tell you. I will not be denied that."

A knock on the door interrupted Scofield's angry threats, and Larry said, "Come in."

The door opened and Carlos stood there, hat in hand, perspiration plastering his clothes to his body. Deeply agitated, he moved his hands behind his back and stared straight at Larry.

Larry pulled him inside the room and shut the door. "Carlos, do you know where Jay is?"

Carlos flicked the perspiration off his forehead and nodded. "*Si.*"

"What!" Mr. Scofield raised his powerful hands and walked menacingly toward Carlos. "One of my own employees is pulling a stunt like this? What are you trying to do, blackmail me?"

Larry grabbed his father and forced him away from the frightened man. The hot flush of anger drained out of Mr. Scofield and turned his face pasty-white.

"Larry, your father is ill!" Susan cried. She held his arm and guided him to a chair. "Please," she implored, "you're going to have a stroke or a heart attack if you don't calm down."

Scofield whispered, "Is the boy all right?"

"*Sí.*" Carlos nodded. "The boy is fine. I bring him home now that Sco is back."

Larry nodded, dismissing Carlos. "Bring Jay home."

Mr. Scofield sat in the chair, his face in his trembling hands. "I don't understand what's going on around here." Raising his face in sorrow, the anger gone, he looked so ill that Susan leaned over and said, "Let us help you to your room. Jay's fine. That's all we need to know for the moment."

The once-powerful man rose uncertainly and let Susan and Larry help him down the hall. At the entrance to the living room he paused and pointed to a chair that faced the painting of his wife. "I find comfort just looking at Delila. Leave me here for a while."

"Are you sure?" Susan wavered. "Shall I call Dr. Marshall?"

"No phone," he said. "No electricity. Somehow it seems fitting . . . this day has tried to ruin me, to pull me apart at the seams . . . but" his voice became stronger—"dammit, I won't let this get me down. I've too much to live for now."

"Father, I'll talk to you later," Larry said. "In

the meantime, don't worry. I'll take care of everything."

Scofield laid his head back against the chair and shut his eyes. "You haven't changed, Lawrence. When you want me to know the truth, you'll tell me."

CHAPTER XIV

It was much later when Jay came running in, unaware that he had caused them so much trouble, and anxiety. Everyone who had been searching so frantically for the boy heard Larry explain:

"Carlos did a very careless thing. He saw the bad storm brewing, so he gathered Jay up and took him home for the night. He intended to bring him back before breakfast, but the rain was so severe they couldn't get across the water-filled arroyo."

Jay confirmed the story. "I played with Manuel. We had lots of fun."

Susan wasn't buying the flimsy explanation. She could tell by the expression on Craig's face that he wasn't, either, but the tension eased somewhat as Maria announced they would have an early dinner.

For the first time Mr. Scofield insisted that Jay be seated at the table with the adults. The old man's color had returned and he appeared in good spirits, as if he had arrived at some decision that pleased him. Jay sat on his right.

The yellow candles on the table, reflected a thousand times by the chandelier, threw shadows on the wall and on the somber faces of the people

eating roast beef, fresh vegetables, and a crisp salad.

"Good thing I cook with gas," Maria laughed as she served. "Don't worry, everybody, this desert will dry up in a hurry. You'll wonder how the water can evaporate so fast."

Susan smiled at Maria's attempt to brighten the faces around her. Janet seemed lost in her own thoughts, as if she were in a hurry to get back to the kennels. Craig chose to ignore Larry, which was easy since Larry kept a stony silence.

Mr. Scofield talked to Jay. "Were you scared last night?" he asked.

"A little bit, sir."

"After this, you come to my room. I'll look after you."

"Yes, sir."

Scofield leaned toward the boy. "Will you stop calling me sir?"

"Ah, yes." Jay glanced at Susan for guidance.

Mr. Scofield added slyly, "Why don't you just call me Grandpa?"

The startling remark caused Janet to drop her knife, and it clattered to the floor. Craig stooped over to help her. Their eyes locked; their eyebrows were question marks of disbelief. Janet straightened up, scowling. "Father, that isn't fair."

Susan waited for Larry to speak up, but he sat stiffly at the opposite end of the table and deliberately ignored his father.

Mr. Scofield was the only one enjoying the drama he had created. Chuckling, he winked at Jay. "We can just pretend. I'll pretend to be your grandpa, and you can pretend to be my grandson."

Taken up with the fun of pretending, Jay giggled. "Grandpa Scofield, please pass the bread, sir."

Scofield roared with laughter. Susan tried to appear disinterested as Jay and Mr. Scofield continued to tease each other. The rest of the Scofield clan kept waiting for one of them to speak up and challenge their father, but no one did.

The lights came back on during dessert, and as soon as Jay finished his cake and ice cream he asked to be excused. He was eager to get back to his new bicycle.

Turning to her father, Janet frowned angrily. "Why are you asking Jay to call you Grandpa?"

Mr. Scofield looked at Larry before replying. "It just seems a good idea. Why, do you object?"

Angry spots of color painted her cheeks. "It isn't fair, that's all. You aren't his grandpa, so why pretend?"

Craig spoke to Larry. "When are you and your—ah—you and Jay and Susan returning to San Francisco?" His gaze bore straight into his brother's eyes, probing for an honest answer.

Instead of answering Craig, Larry turned to Janet. "What would you think if I left Jay here permanently? He'd certainly be happy. He could

catch the school bus with the other children." He paused, looking very serious. "Janet, would you look after him?"

"No!" Exploding with pent-up anger, Janet repeated, "No! Don't expect me to mother that that orphan boy. He's your problem, not mine!"

"Janet!" Involuntarily Susan protested, shocked. "You asked me to talk to Larry about leaving Jay here. You wanted the responsibility."

"Well, I don't now," Janet snapped, her face flushed. "I've changed my mind." She stood up so quickly, that her chair fell backward. "Excuse me," she muttered, and rushed out of the room.

Craig picked up the chair and measured his words carefully. "You should have known better, Larry. Can your memory be so short that you forgot Janet lost a baby that would be just about Jay's age today?"

"Dead at birth!" Mr. Scofield snarled. "And a good thing, too, what with her running away and marrying that half-breed scalawag!"

"A marriage that you had annulled," Larry remarked.

"But not in time!" Scofield snapped. "When Dr. Marshall came out and took care of Janet, I told him I wanted no half-caste grandchild on my family tree."

"It must have pleased you very much, Father," Larry retorted, "when you didn't have to face a half-caste grandchild."

Scofield turned red at the sarcasm in Larry's voice. "I'll take no insolence from you." His eyebrows knotted together in a heavy scowl. "I also demand that you leave that boy here, permanently."

"But, Father," Craig cried, "why?"

Scofield looked sternly at Larry, waiting for him to answer Craig's question. After a long silence, he answered for him. "Let's say it's in the boy's best interest." His eyes mirrored his grief and disappointment. "Unless you can prove to me that it isn't, I consider the matter settled."

Waiting for Larry to defend himself, Susan felt numb with shock. Why didn't he speak up and tell Craig and his father the truth? The truth surely couldn't be as terrible as this suspicious silence.

The white line around Larry's set lips betrayed the turmoil going on inside him, but he stubbornly refused to speak.

"Excuse me, please." Susan had to get away. Her blind loyalty to Larry was beginning to crumble. "I'd rather not remain while you discuss such private family affairs."

The men rose, and she hurried outside and sat by the pool. The cool blue of the water had a soothing effect on her nerves. She took a deep breath and longed for the smell of the sea, the sound of a foghorn, the tumbled variety of the San Francisco hills. Helpless, frustrating tears coursed

down her cheeks. Then she heard the creak of the gate.

Larry walked up behind her. "Susan." His voice, low and husky, broke for a minute. "I've missed you very much." He touched her shoulders and turned her slowly around. "I can't fight it any longer. I'm in love with you."

Staring into his serious green eyes, his fingers pressed firmly against her burning flesh, Susan tried to comprehend the full impact of his words.

"When Eric was here," he continued, "I suffered the devil's own torment, wondering if you were really in love with him." He smiled tenderly. "Don't look so shocked, Susie." She started to speak, and he put his finger over her lips. "Please hear me out." He put his arm around her, and they walked around the pool. "If I'm to be honest, I must admit I started to fall in love with you the minute I opened my apartment door and saw you there, so beautiful, so fragile and wide-eyed . . . and so scared. But who believes in love at first sight? Not me, not Larry Scofield, world traveler."

Susan moved away from his exciting touch. "Please –don't." She put her hands over her face, trying to keep the tears from choking her. Then it hadn't been her imagination after all. There had been an instant attraction between them from the very start. It must have been this hidden feeling that had kept her from accepting Eric's engage-

ment ring. She loved Eric in the way she loved Craig, affectionately, but could that kind of love ever develop into a relationship strong enough for marriage?

"Susie, don't be afraid of me." Larry sensed the mixed-up emotions that were fighting inside her. "I -I'll admit my past hasn't been—well, the greatest, but I can't change that." He took her hands tenderly in his. "But I can promise you my complete devotion from now on. Susie, will you marry me?" Pulling her into his arms, he kissed her forehead, her cheeks, and then claimed her lips boldly, demanding a response.

Susan's heart, beating wildly in spite of her resistance, seemed to say, You love him, you love him and then she remembered Maria's advice to love with the heart. "Oh, Larry," she sighed, nestling in his arms. "Does this mean that you and Jay and I will be going back to San Francisco?"

His arms stiffened around her as he smothered his face in her hair, breathing deeply of her perfume.

"Larry?" Susan pulled back and forced him to look at her. "Did you hear me? We'll go home now?"

"Yes." He gazed intently into her eyes. "You and I will be going home soon."

"But what about Jay?"

"No." His eyes turned dark. "Jay stays here."

"I can't believe you!" Susan jerked away from

him, anger spilling through her body. "How can you leave your son here? What kind of man are you?"

His voice turned hard, letting her plea go unanswered. "You heard me say that Jay is not my son."

"I heard you, yes," Susan cried, "but I didn't believe you."

Larry's face turned white, and his eyes flashed with anger.

"Larry, I'm not asking you to justify your past. I, too, realize that it is behind you forever. But I *am* insisting that we treat Jay as your son, not as a forlorn orphan to be dumped on your relatives."

Larry grasped her shoulders so harshly that his fingers dug deeply into her soft flesh. "You don't know what you're asking!"

Susan wrenched free of his hands, almost glad to feel him hurting her as she lashed out against him. "It's the only way I can marry you, Larry! I I can't love a man who would do this to an innocent little boy!"

"Susan, Susan," Larry cried out bitterly, as if this burden were more than he could bear. "You still don't know what love is!"

"Then if this is what it does to people, I don't want to learn." She ran past him and rushed to her room. Throwing herself across the bed, she sobbed until there were no more tears left.

Slowly, almost in a trance, she got up and

bathed her face, unable to look at her reflection in the mirror, not wanting to see the pain in her eyes from realizing she was in love with Larry Scofield. She would always love him. How would she ever build a life without him?

Susan sighed. Somehow she had to face reality, because this was one dream that would never be realized.

CHAPTER XV

Susan awoke with the bright morning sunshine streaming through the window. Maria was right: the rain had rapidly evaporated under the hot sun. There was no visible sign of the terrible anguish the storm had caused.

Susan showered and chose a long flowing hostess gown the color of a robin's egg to wear on this Sunday morning. She might not be a guest of the Scofields much longer, so she was determined to look her best. Sunday mornings at the ranch were usually leisurely, chatting affairs. For the first time she walked slowly toward the sound of voices, dreading to face Larry.

Maria's happy face welcomed her, and the men stood up until she was seated.

Charming and debonair, Larry acted as if he were courting her. "You are gorgeous, Miss Nash." He glanced at his brother and father. "At least we can all agree on that.

Craig smiled, and Mr. Scofield grumbled good-naturedly, "Don't pay any attention to his flirting. He's been that way all his life." He looked curiously at his two sons, trying his best to explain them. "One is an extrovert and one is an introvert,

and I have a daughter who prefers her own company most of the time. I never could understand my own children. Their mother could read them like a book, but . . ." His voice trailed off, remembering his Delila.

"Oh, by the way, Craig," Larry said, "you'll never guess who I ran into at the airport. Maggie Kelly."

"Maggie Kelly!" Interest flickered in Craig's eyes, although he tried to appear unconcerned. "How is she?"

"Fine. Just fine." He watched Craig carefully as he added, "She asked about you, wanted to know if you were married—you know, stuff like that."

Craig paused with his coffee cup halfway to his mouth. He set the cup back on the saucer. "I suppose Maggie's married by this time."

"Nope." Larry winked at Susan. "In fact, I've invited her out. Seems she's come home for the summer, so I thought, what the heck, with Maggie around it would seem like old times again."

"Yeah?" Craig breathed deeply. "When is she coming?"

"Today. She should be here pretty soon."

"Today! Why didn't you mention it sooner?" Craig scraped his chair back and stood up, looking wildly around as if trying to find a place to hide.

"Why not today? It's Sunday. I can't think of a better time."

"Sure, sure," Craig ran his hands over his hair.

"Excuse me, I've got lots to do if we're going to have company." He almost ran from the room.

Susan turned to Larry. "You're awfully good at inviting people out here. Obviously you've upset your brother."

"Come now, Susie, Craig isn't upset exactly, just temporarily in shock. It's good for him. Maggie and he were once engaged, something happened, and she went away. When I realized she hadn't married, either, I thought it would be a good idea to get them together. Who knows, this time it might work out."

"I know about Maggie, but why are you playing Cupid again?"

"'Meddling' is the proper word," Mr. Scofield observed, "but it'll be good to see Maggie. Guess I'll go spruce up a bit, too."

Susan raised her eyebrows. "Well, I can see this Maggie is well remembered and well liked by the Scofield clan."

Quickly Larry got up and held Susan's face and kissed her once before she drew back. "Please, Larry, I haven't changed my mind."

"Neither have I. I intend to pursue you every moment until you find me absolutely irresistible."

Susan frowned at his lighthearted attitude. "It's beyond me how you can act so—so happy-go-lucky when everything here is so mixed up. I feel so sorry for Jay. You don't deserve a fine boy like that."

"Don't condemn me, Susie, until you hear the whole story."

"Well, tell me the whole story," she said. "See if I can understand."

Jay came running in from the patio. "Hi!" He grinned happily. "Where's Grandpa Scofield?"

Susan turned her back as Larry said, "In his room. Why?"

"I want to show him how I ride my new bicycle." He ran down the hall, searching for Mr. Scofield.

"Susie," Larry pleaded, "trust me."

"Yes," Susan responded bitterly. "I'm sure you said the same thing to Jay's mother."

He remained silent as she pushed past him and went to her room. Angry at Larry, angry at herself, she jerked her suitcases off the closet shelf and set them on an empty chair. With Jay calling Mr. Scofield Grandpa, they certainly didn't need her any longer. The sooner she could get away, the better. Perhaps this Maggie person would drop her off at the airport.

Someone tapped softly on the door, interrupting her plans. Craig stood in the hallway, dressed in a Western suit and polished cowboy boots, with every hair on his head in place. "How do I look?"

"Why, fine, Craig." When he began fidgeting with his tie, she added, "In fact, very handsome."

"Susan—uh—" Craig blushed. "Will you help me out, please?"

"How can I help you?"

He swallowed several times. "Just be there when Maggie comes."

"All right." The sound of a car coming up the lane turned Craig's face white to red to white again. She touched his arm, and this time he didn't pull away. "Come on, let's go greet Maggie."

Larry had escorted Maggie into the living room; she sat stiffly erect on a straight-backed chair by the fireplace. Craig and Susan walked in, and Maggie stood up, holding her breath and staring with large brown eyes at Craig.

He crossed the room, started to embrace Maggie, then held back. "Hi," he said shyly. "It's been a long time."

Maggie held out both hands. "Yes, a long time."

Larry made the introductions, and Susan immediately liked the tall, dark-haired woman. In the elaborate Scofield living room, she had the look of belonging. No wonder Craig was never able to forget her.

Mr. Scofield arrived and was equally charmed to see Maggie again.

Jay managed to get off his bicycle long enough to hold out his hand to Maggie and say, "Howdy, ma'am." He turned to Mr. Scofield and complained, "You promised to watch me ride, Grandpa Scofield."

Looking startled at how the boy addressed Mr. Scofield, Maggie glanced around the room, waiting for an explanation.

"It's all pretend, Maggie," Scofield laughed. "The boy and I like to pretend."

Susan looked directly at Larry, hoping he would speak up. But he stood by the fireplace, aloof, silent, completely changed from the vibrant, jovial host of a moment before. If Susan hadn't known the truth, she would have felt very sorry for this puzzling man.

Mr. Scofield was very persuasive. He urged Maggie to stay at the ranch for a few days instead of going on to Phoenix. Perhaps he thought that if given a chance, she and Craig might recapture the past.

When Maggie consented, Susan had no other choice but to ask Larry to drive her to the airport. She found him in the study, working on his Phoenix assignment.

"You want to go home?" he asked. "Don't you like it here?"

Determined not to wear her heart on her sleeve, she argued, "I feel my job is over. Jay no longer needs me, and I want to get back to the Coast and look for work."

"Susan, is it Eric?" Larry forced her to look him in the eye. "Tell me you love him with all your heart and soul, and I'll get you to the airport immediately."

"Larry, I—I—"

"Tell me!" Urgently he probed the expression on

her face. Susan's gaze collapsed before his searching eyes, and his arms pulled her to him. "Susie, be patient, and we'll soon go back to San Francisco together."

Sighing, unable to resist the strength of Larry's embrace, she relaxed against him for a moment, wishing they had met under happier circumstances. But they *had* met, and Susan would remember forever the devastating depths of love, the deep promise of fulfillment that she would never know. Once she was back in San Francisco, her life would return to the more sensible level of the typing pool, bowling on Friday, and Sunday dinner with Eric and his mother. After a proper length of time Larry would surely fade away, and she and Eric could be reasonably happy.

Larry's arms tightened as he murmured again, "You and I will go back together."

Susan pulled away, wanting to hear that Jay would be included. She tried to convince herself that the principle involved was really none of her business. Jay at least had a pretend grandpa now, and he was so happy on the ranch, why should she make an issue of whether Larry was ever going to admit that the boy was a Scofield?

The door burst open and Mr. Scofield hurried in, surprised to find them in his study. Impatiently he brushed aside Larry's explanation. He didn't have the time to listen.

"Apache Chief is acting very strange, running

around the corral and whining in pain. I don't like the way he looks." Scofield reached for the phone to call Doc Davis. The line was busy. "Larry, keep trying this number, and when you get Doc, tell him to beat it out here on the double. I'm that worried about the horse." He nodded to Susan. "I'm going to get back down there. I'll have him in a stall by the time Doc gets here."

Larry finally reached the veterinarian's office, only to discover that Doc Davis was out on an emergency. "But," his office nurse added, "I'll send out his assistant. He's new, but he's a good doctor."

Turning from the phone, Larry said, "Come on, Susie, let's go help Dad until the vet comes."

At times Susan had to almost run to keep up with Larry's rapid stride to the corrals. She was surprised that he was so gravely concerned about the horse.

John Hazen and Carlos were helping Mr. Scofield lead the ailing horse into the confines of the stables. Foamy sweat covered most of his golden coat as he reared and pulled against the rope.

Mr. Scofield patted him on the neck and spoke in a soft, calm voice. "Quiet down, now, Apache. Help is on the way." Expertly his hand explored the animal, looking for some reason for the upset. "I can't see anything wrong—it must be internal."

John patted his own stomach. "Probably indigestion. We could fix him a dose of salts."

"No, we'll wait and get a professional opinion first." Scofield looked at his watch. "The doc should be here soon." He turned to Larry. "Did you get hold of him?"

Larry nodded. "I talked to his nurse. Davis is out on an emergency, so she's sending his assistant."

"Since when has Davis had an assistant?" Scofield chuckled. "Well, I guess the old doc is slowing down, like the rest of us old codgers." He glanced fondly at his horse. "This new doctor had better be good, eh, Carlos? If he's not, we'll send him back to Compton in a hurry."

Carlos nodded. "*Sí.*" Worried, he glanced at Larry. He was worried, too, wondering about the identity of the new doctor. Could it be Ramon Romero, Carlos's cousin?

Silently the group watched the far road until the faint trail of dust became stronger and fuller, revealing the rapidly approaching truck. Scofield sighed in relief as it roared up the road and turned off toward the stables.

Larry's apprehension grew. That driver knew exactly where he was going. He might be a new veterinarian, but he was no stranger to the Scofield property. He hurried to his father and put a restraining hand on him. "Dad, listen, there's something you should know."

"Not now." Impatiently Scofield threw off Larry's hand and hurried to the truck. "Come on, Doc, the sick animal is my prize stallion."

The new veterinarian turned off the engine and slowly opened the door, stalling for time, holding back the moment of recognition as long as possible.

Larry reached his father's side as Ramon Romero stepped out. "Good morning, sir."

"What are you doing here?" The hoarse whisper choked the old man, and Larry kept him from falling against the truck. Scofield raised his fist. "Get off my land, you no-account half-caste!" He turned purple, and Larry yelled, "Help me, Carlos."

The men supported him to a wooden bench where he slumped down, unable to talk.

Susan grabbed a clean towel hanging on a wooden peg and wet it under a nearby faucet. Quickly she applied it to his forehead. "He looks so ill. What's wrong, Larry?"

"It's because of me," Ramon said. "He's seeing a ghost from the past."

Ramon hurried to the stall. John Hazen shook his hand and patted him on the back. "Well, I'll be darned. Never thought I'd ever see you again, and here you are a vet. Well, I'll be darned! Wait until Maria hears about this."

"Greetings, John." Ramon touched the horse. "Whoa, boy, let's see what's hurting you." Setting his bag on the floor, he began to examine the animal. While he was doing this, Susan finally realized that he was the same person she had seen

go into Janet's place. Mr. Scofield must have known about Janet and this Ramon after all.

"Come on, Father, I'm taking you to the house." Larry helped his father up.

Mr. Scofield climbed wearily into his pickup, and Susan got in beside him.

Larry began barking orders. "Carlos, get Janet and bring Ramon to the house when he's through. John, send Craig up immediately and see that Jay stays out of the way."

John nodded and hurried away. Ramon continued examining the horse as Carlos headed for the kennels.

Susan felt Mr. Scofield's pulse. He would have to have a strong constitution to survive many more such shocks. She wondered if they should call Dr. Marshall.

Trembling, his tall frame slightly stooped, Mr. Scofield refused their help into the house. Larry insisted that his father sit in his overstuffed chair near the fireplace, facing the portrait of his beloved Delila.

"Father, the time has come to clear the air whether you're ready or not. You must learn to forgive and to forget. There's no other way."

"Forget?" Scofield snarled. "I'll never forget. You throw that scoundrel off my property immediately, or I will —" Angrily he rose, trying to get control of himself.

Larry pushed him back into the chair. "Isn't it

better to bend than to break?" He leaned down and put his arm around his father's shoulder, hoping to calm the surging storm of resentment. "Watch over him, Susan. I have to get something from my room."

Susan knelt down and took Scofield's gnarled, clenched hands in her own. "Please, you must accept what's best." Tears welled up in her eyes. "Remember Jay. You have a grandson now. Don't let this joy be taken from you."

"Yes," Scofield sighed. "He is my grandson. I know he is." He touched his chest. "My heart tells me, as well as the mark on his head. No matter what Lawrence says, I know. He must tell me the truth, he must!"

"He will." Susan smiled. "You'll see."

Janet hurried into the room, her face so white that the freckles stood out on her face like brown splotches of rust.

Craig came in with Maggie, glanced at his father, and turned to Susan in alarm. "What's happening here? Dad looks terribly sick."

Maggie started to leave the room, but Craig held her back, then demanded of Susan, "Why hasn't someone called Dr. Marshall?" He whirled around as Larry walked in, followed by Carlos and Ramon.

"Oh, my God." Craig stared at Ramon, then at Janet, and finally back at his father. "No wonder he's sick." He dropped his hat on the carpet and

strode toward Ramon. "How dare you walk in here and almost kill my father!"

Ramon waited, his muscles taut, ready for Craig's next move.

Janet screamed and threw herself in front of Ramon. "Don't you touch him!" She looked wildly around the room. "All of you leave him alone." Her chin raised defiantly. "Father, this man is my husband."

Anger turned Scofield's face red, and the bushy eyebrows knit together as his blue eyes locked on Janet.

"It's true," she continued, "and you'd better stop playing God. You annulled our marriage, but as soon as I found out I was pregnant, Ramon and I sneaked out and got married again." Tears ran unheeded down Janet's cheeks. "Maybe if you'd left us alone, my baby would have lived."

"Born dead," Scofield snapped. "It was for the best."

"You said he was born dead," Janet sobbed. "I never saw my baby. I never held him in my arms."

"You were too ill," her father told her. "Somebody had to take over, do what had to be done."

Ramon put his arms around Janet. "That is all in the past." His dark eyes moved determinedly to each one in the room, all looking stunned with shock. "Janet is my wife and I can now take care of her." His eyes rested finally on Mr. Scofield. "You

can accept me as your son-in-law or send us both away. It's up to you."

Scofield stared at the people around him: Larry keeping in the shadows; Craig standing like a bulwark between him and Janet and her husband; Maggie waiting in the background. It is done, he thought; it is done. Janet has made her bed, now let her lie in it. Gruffly he asked, "How's my stallion?"

Slowly Ramon let his breath out, and a faint smile of relief tugged at his mouth. "He has a very bad stomach ache. He'll be all right."

Scofield nodded, accepting Ramon's diagnosis. It might be handy, after all, to have a doctor of veterinary medicine in the Scofield family.

Picking up his hat, Craig accepted his father's decision that Janet would go with her Ramon at long last.

Susan turned to leave the room, greatly relieved that the old man had survived this last revelation. It would take time, but she knew that Ramon would eventually take his place at the elaborate dining-room table beside his wife.

"Just a minute!" Mr. Scofield stood up and turned to Larry. "I want them all to know that I will not be denied my grandson." He threw back his sagging shoulders, and his voice grew stronger. "I have undeniable proof that Jay is truly my grandson. Do you all hear me? Jay is a Scofield!"

CHAPTER XVI

Janet rushed to her father's side. "What are you saying?"

"Tell them, Larry," Mr. Scofield insisted. "Tell everyone that Jay is your son, my grandson!"

"I will admit that Jay is a Scofield," Larry said simply, "but he is not my son."

Janet screamed and shook her father's arm. "Then he must be mine—he must be mine and Ramon's!"

"Calm down, Janet." Ramon tried to pull her away. "Our son died five years ago, don't you remember?"

Janet broke away and looked at the stunned faces in the room, accusing them all. "I didn't see my son. Ramon was gone, I—" She pointed a trembling finger at her father. "You lied to me all these years. You've been living a lie." She collapsed in a chair, moaning in despair. "Jay is my son. He must be my son!"

"Janet!" Larry grabbed his sister, pulling her to her feet and shaking her until she looked at him. "Stop it, do you hear me?"

"You're just as bad as the rest of them," she sobbed. "You could have come home and helped me, but you didn't you didn't!"

The cords in Larry's neck stretched tight enough to break. Susan and Ramon led Janet over to the sofa and tried to calm her.

"Sit down." The command of Larry's voice thundered in the room like a cannon shot. He handed a stiff, legal-looking document to his father. "This is the boy's birth certificate. Please read the name of the mother and father. Read it out loud let the world know who this boy really is." His father hesitated, and Larry demanded again, "Go on, you are so anxious to establish his identity. Well, so am I!"

Mr. Scofield held the paper with shaking fingers, and read: "The mother is Olivia . . . Olivia Chase Scofield. The father is Jason Craig Scofield. The boy's legal name is Jason Craig Scofield."

Astonished and bewildered, Craig stared at his father. "What are you saying? That this child is named after me?"

Larry put his hand on his brother's arm. "Craig, he is not named after you. He is your son!" He pushed him down on a chair. "Do you remember Olivia Chase?"

"Of course I remember Olivia." Craig's questioning eyes turned to Carlos. "How much do they know?" His hands swept the room. "What have you told them?"

"Only Sco knows," Carlos said. "I promised him I'd say nothing until—"

"What in hell is going on here?" Mr. Scofield

roared in anger as he got up and turned to Craig. "What have you been hiding from me?" he demanded.

"Slow down, Father," Craig said quietly, "and shut up for a minute. Yes, I've kept something from you for a long time. But let's go back five years. You were strong-handing Janet for the mess she'd gotten into...for falling in love with someone you deemed beneath her. In fact, you were so darned busy meddling, you payed little attention to the fact that Maggie and I had just broken up. When Maggie left town, I—I—" Craig's voice grew hoarse with emotion as he glanced at Maggie, hoping she would understand what he was about to confess. Swallowing hard, he faced the family. "Carlos and I decided to go on a binge to Mexico City, remember?"

Scofield stirred. "Ah, yes, I remember. You were gone almost a month. I thought you never would get back here to your responsibilities."

"I met Olivia in a bar. We were both suffering from rejected love. I told her about Maggie, and she showed me a picture of her Dave Barker. We were both on the rebound, feeling very sorry for ourselves, so, with Carlos as our witness, we—ah --Olivia and I got married."

"Married!" Scofield sat down in his chair as if his legs had turned to marble. "You never came home with any—any bride! *You never told me.*"

"No." Shame etched itself on Craig's face. "We

lived it up for a few days, but Olivia was more honest than I. She said what I was unwilling to admit, that our sudden marriage was a mistake. She wanted to go back to her Dave. What could I do but let her? She promised that she'd annul the marriage and write to me, but she never did. I plunged into hard work when I got back here... and Olivia and Mexico City just gradually faded away. I haven't been interested in another woman all these years, so I didn't care whether I was legally married or divorced." He stopped, the import of Jay's heritage hitting him again like a sledgehammer. "But I never knew. I swear to God I didn't know this." His pained eyes looked at Larry. "Why did you wait five years to tell me?"

"Because I didn't know myself until Olivia was killed. Then I went through her private papers and found this this birth certificate. I couldn't believe it, either. Then I remembered Father's birthmark, and I immediately checked Jay's head. Imagine my shock when I found it there, the undeniable Scofield mark."

Mr. Scofield moaned. "I can't believe it, my son Craig."

Larry continued. "Now you can understand why I decided to make this trip home and force the truth out of Carlos. I felt that he just had to know. But as you can see, I didn't know how to go about telling you. I thought if I waited until you got acquainted with Jay, after you got to know each

other, it would be easier for you to accept. That's why I delayed telling you. I hired Susan to watch over him, and I kept hoping there would be a right time..." Larry helplessly spread out his hands, trying to get Craig to understand.

"I'm the one who kept the secret all this time," Carlos said, stepping forward. "Olivia came to me and asked if I would help her."

"But," Craig interrupted him, "why you, why not me? Especially since I was the father?"

"Because she knew that your affair was only a temporary thing like you said, love on the rebound. She still loved Dave, and after their quarrel he joined the Marines. Olivia knew that if you found out about the baby, you'd insist on bringing her here, and she wanted to be in San Francisco, where Dave was stationed." Carlos looked around, hoping to be understood, too. "I thought of Larry, and I asked him to let her stay there and be his housekeeper after the baby was born. She just used the name Lucerno to keep anyone from guessing." Carlos swallowed hard, trying to stay calm.

"But what about Dave?" Craig demanded. "Where does he fit in?"

"He never came back from the war. He never knew about any of this."

Janet was still sobbing, and Ramon held her hand as he spoke. "I, too, was suspicious when I'd heard about this boy coming into the family all of a

sudden, especially since he was about the same age as our our boy would have been. My cousin José and I tried to find him one night I wanted to check out this birthmark business but we were almost caught, and we had to run away before I could see him."

"You!" Susan exclaimed. "So it was you that almost scared me to death!"

"Yes." Ramon nodded. "I'm truly sorry."

Craig walked the floor, trying to digest the import of what he was hearing. "My son. Jay is my son!" He turned to Larry. "Are you sure? Absolutely sure?" His hand moved over his eyes as he shook his head in disbelief.

"Do you need more proof, Craig?" Mr. Scofield pushed up the hair at the back of his head. "Well, here it is, the mark of the scorpion. You shall see that your son has the same mark on his head."

Craig sat down, letting the truth sink into his consciousness.

Larry approached Susan. "Now you can see why I had to wait," he said. "It was such a grave, intimate family situation that I knew if the timing wasn't just right, it might all blow up in my face. Jay's whole future was at stake, and I just couldn't risk any slip-up. I had to work it out my way."

Crying with relief, Susan never felt so close to the Scofield family as she did right now, with Craig assembling the facts in his mind, his father satisfied that he had a real grandson at last, and

Janet and Ramon starting a new life together, happy and proud that their love had been able to withstand the relentless but unwise assaults of a stubborn old man.

Carlos grinned at last, standing twice as tall, it seemed to Susan, as he poked Larry playfully on the arm. "We did it, Sco. It's going to be all right after all."

Larry hugged his lifelong friend. "The burden has been mainly yours, *amigo*. Five years is a long time to quietly help all these . . .these Scofields."

Carlos was husky-voiced from keeping his emotions under tight control. "Now may I tell John and Maria? That cousin is so suspicious. I've had a hard time trying to keep her questions from getting the truth out of me."

"Cousin!" Susan exclaimed. "Is everyone around here your cousin?"

"*Sí, señorita*, everyone!"

Janet looked at her father with compassion and, finally, forgiveness. He cleared his throat and said to Ramon, "You take good care of my daughter."

"I will, sir." The muscles on Ramon's cheeks moved with emotion as he and Scofield shook hands, dissolving, at least in part, the hard memories of the past.

Standing quietly in the background, Maggie had been forced to watch the devastating impact of the news on Craig. She walked over to the man she had so foolishly left five years ago and tenderly

pressed her cheek against his bowed head. Then she left the room, in a hurry to be alone with her own churning emotions.

Larry put his arms around Susan. "I've asked this girl to marry me, Father. So far she hasn't agreed to it, but I thought you should be warned that you might be getting a daughter-in-law."

Susan blushed with pleasure as Mr. Scofield kissed her cheek. "Take a chance on us, Susan. As you can see, we are able to survive almost anything."

"You had me worried for a while."

Larry's arm encircled her waist. "Now we can return to San Francisco."

She nodded, feeling suddenly despondent about leaving. She would miss everyone so much, especially Jay. It wasn't going to be easy to say good-bye.

Sensing the turmoil she was trying to hide, Larry said, "Let's go in the morning. If we get out of the way while this situation is still new, Craig will find it easier to really get acquainted with his son. Don't you think so?"

"Yes. You're right."

Larry held her close, then shoved her gently toward her room. "Get packed, and I'll make all the arrangements."

Susan was wondering how Jay would feel about all this when he popped into her room and saw her packing.

"When are you going away?" he asked.

"Tomorrow."

He sat on her bed. "I get to stay here."

Relieved that Larry had talked to Jay and prepared him for their departure, Susan smiled. "Do you want to stay here?"

"Yes." He nodded, a very serious expression on his face. "I belong here."

"Why do you belong here?" Susan had to ask.

His smoothly tanned face, earnestly contemplating Susan, reminded her of a Gainesborough painting. "Grandpa Scofield just told me he was going to be my real grandpa from now on. That means I belong here. Besides, I have to take care of Skippy and the puppies, don't I?" He patted Susan's arm. "I hope you won't get too lonesome for me in San Francisco."

She held him tightly for a minute. "I'll try not to miss you too much, especially now that you have such a nice home."

"Good." Jay smiled. "You can always come to visit us. Do you know why?"

"No. Why?"

"Because you're my friend!" He bounced off the bed and ran happily outside.

Susan had been feeling sorry for Jay, and actually he was feeling sorry for her. But the happy ray of sunshine warming her soul convinced her that somewhere along the way Jay had accepted her as his friend.

CHAPTER XVII

The next morning the good-byes after breakfast were heartfelt and genuine.

Craig promised to keep in touch. "I feel like a new man; I feel alive. Maggie and I are going to work this out together. We both want to get acquainted with my son."

Janet and Ramon stood shyly to the side, holding hands. Susan hugged the girl, whispering, "I wish you much happiness. I think you have a handsome, very smart husband."

Janet's shining eyes as she looked at the new doctor of veterinary medicine were testimony enough that she completely agreed.

Maria hugged Susan. "Promise me you'll come back soon." John smiled awkwardly and shook hands.

"If I can get her to marry me," Larry told Maria, "we'll probably honeymoon in Alaska. I think that's my next assignment."

"Why couldn't it have been somewhere more romantic," Maria said, "like France or Spain?"

"With me around," Larry promised, "she won't need atmosphere, too."

Maria whispered in Susan's ear, "Don't forget what I told you, my pretty one. Always listen to your heart."

Looking remarkably well after all the recent turmoil, Mr. Scofield held Susan in a warm embrace. "Lawrence is a lucky man. Come back soon."

The tears were awfully close to the surface as Larry started the rental car back toward Phoenix. Susan turned around for one more look and saw Jay standing on a high boulder, waving his new cowboy hat. "And I worried about leaving him," she said.

"Haven't I always said you worry too much?"

Susan snuggled close to Larry, realizing that before too long, she would have to tell Eric that she couldn't possibly marry him.

The big plane in Phoenix lifted them into a clear blue sky full of fleecy white clouds and warm sunshine, and, a few hours later, gently let them out into the fine mist of San Francisco.

Susan smiled, aware that her beautiful tan drew admiring glances from the other passengers waiting for their luggage. She breathed deeply of the cool air, realizing how much she had missed the smells of the seaport.

Larry hailed a taxi and had the driver wait while he deposited Susan at her apartment. "I'll call you later and we'll make plans." He kissed her,

whispered, "I love you," and went dashing back to the cab.

Susan walked around her apartment, sorting the mail that the landlady hadn't forwarded to the ranch. There were several messages from Eric to call the minute she arrived back in town. I'll do that later, she thought. Her letters to him had been less frequent and more impersonal, and he would want to know why. It wasn't going to be easy convincing him she had fallen deeply in love with someone else in the short time she had been away.

Susan soaked for a long time in a hot bubble bath, then wrapped herself up in a long pink bathrobe. For a while it felt good being by herself again, listening to the sounds of traffic out on the street. She would miss the quiet stillness of the ranch, she knew, but if she went with Larry, it would mean living out of a suitcase, and she had better get used to it.

The jangling of the telephone startled her. She cradled the phone expectantly, eager to hear Larry's voice. "Hello."

"Well, at last!" Eric sounded relieved, but there was an edge to his voice. "I've been dialing your number every day, hoping you'd answer. Susan, you haven't been very good about writing lately."

"I know, Eric. How are you? How's your mother?"

"Just fine. Mother's planning on you for dinner the first Sunday after your return."

Susan shut her eyes. How to tell him? When to tell him? There might not be time to see him personally. Larry might say they were getting married and leaving immediately for Alaska.

Feeling terribly selfish, she decided Eric must be told now. "I'm sorry, but I can't come to dinner. Not this Sunday or any other Sunday. Eric, please try to understand. You see, I'm going to marry Larry Scofield." The long silence on the phone became unbearable. "Eric, are you there? Eric?"

"Yes, I'm here, and I'm not terribly surprised, although I will say I'm certainly disappointed in you. Any fool could see how much that guy Scofield was in love with you. I just hope you aren't making the mistake of your life."

"I can't help it, Eric. I love him, and you wouldn't want me under those circumstances."

"Sometimes we mistake passion for love. Susan, this affair with that worldly man could destroy you. Can't you see that?"

Susan shivered in the warm robe, remembering the note so mysteriously left on her pillow that night, promising that love would either purify or destroy. "I'm sorry, Eric, but I –I have nothing to offer you."

"All right." Eric sighed. "But I'll still be here if you ever need me. Good-bye Susan."

"Good-bye Eric." She stared at the humming receiver and slowly set it back on the cradle. Eric really didn't sound so terribly devastated at losing

her. He had come on so strong, so vibrant at the ranch, but now he had slipped back into his old familiar routine. It would be bowling every Friday night and Sunday dinner with his mother for the next girl in his life.

Susan waited and waited for Larry to call. Finally, impatiently, she dialed his number. The call was transferred to his answering service. "Mr. Scofield is expected home soon. Please leave a message."

Susan hung up, feeling restless and suddenly penned in by her small apartment. I'll go to him, she decided. Surely he'll be home by the time I get there.

She tossed the robe on her bed, dressed carefully, and caught a taxi. After giving the driver Larry's address, she sat back to enjoy the bustle of the city. New confidence and indescribable happiness surged through her as she dwelled upon her exciting future as Mrs. Lawrence Scofield. Can this really be happening to me? she mused. Susan Nash, girl typist?

The doorman opened the magnificent entry to the large apartment complex, and Susan wondered if he was the same man who had taken Jay to the movies. She stepped confidently into the carpeted elevator and tapped her toes impatiently, waiting to be delivered to the fifteenth floor.

Susan almost ran down the hall to Number 1550. She rang the doorbell twice. When there was

no response, she rang it again for a long time. Apparently he hadn't gotten home. She had turned to go when the door swept open. She stepped back, stunned.

Valerie McCauley, looking beautiful and sophisticated in a black evening dress, leaned against the door, a drink in her hand. "Yes? May I help you?"

"Oh . . .I was looking for Mr. Scofield. I thought he'd be home."

"He was here, but he's gone again. May I take a message?" Valerie peered at Susan in the light from the hallway. "Aren't you that Miss Nash whom he hired as a baby sitter to that . . . boy?"

"Yes." The color drained out of Susan's face. She was afraid Valerie would read the truth in her eyes. "I'm supposed to ship the rest of Jay's things to him." She backed off. "But that can wait."

The ice cubes clicked sharply against Valerie's glass as she waved it at Susan. "It must have been ghastly for you, stuck in that Godforsaken desert."

"No." Susan kept the frozen smile on her face. "It worked out rather well."

"Larry told me how indispensable you were, Miss Nash. I surely do appreciate your helping him out." The condescending smile widened on her carefully made-up face. "But then, he pays quite well. I guess all jobs have their compensations."

Susan felt as if Valerie McCauley had just

slapped her in the face. "Tell Mr. Scofield I wasn't able to wait," she said stiffly.

"Bravo," Valerie approved. "Let him mail them himself." She began shutting the door, and Susan stumbled to the elevator.

The tears in her eyes made it difficult to find the Down button. Oh, Maria, she moaned silently, you were wrong when you advised me to listen with my heart. I should have listened to my head. I should have stayed here safe and sound and married Eric, and I would never have known the wild, tumultuous heartbeat caused by a flamboyant, many-mooded, eternal bachelor!

Susan caught another taxi home, and this time she was oblivious to the busyness of the evening. The sound of the key in her door, locking out the world and closing her into the narrow cocoon of her old life, was the final straw. She cried herself to sleep. The telephone rang late into the night. She let it ring.

The early-morning sun had barely reached her quiet street when Susan awoke to the sounds of someone pounding on the door and ringing the bell at the same time.

"Susan!" Larry's voice thundered outside. "Let me in!"

Susan scrambled out of bed, grabbing her robe. "Hush!" she cried. "Do you want to wake everybody up? What will the neighbors think?"

"I don't care what anybody thinks!" Larry

waited impatiently as she unbolted the door. "Susan, what's the matter with you? Why are you so afraid to say I love you?" he demanded. "Why are you unable to make a commitment?"

"How dare you burst in here, Larry Scofield, and ask me to say I love you! It's easy for *you* to say it, because you've had so much more practice than I have!" She was angry and still felt humiliated. "Why don't you get back to your Miss McCauley?"

"She's not my Miss McCauley."

"She certainly acted as if *your* apartment was *her* apartment last night."

"You're jealous," Larry yelled. "That's a good sign! You wouldn't be jealous if you didn't care."

"Oh, I care. I care too much to interfere between you and Valerie McCauley!"

"Susie, you have so much to learn. Valerie came to the apartment shortly after I arrived home. I made it very clear to her that I was in love with you and that I planned to marry you."

"But – but—she acted –"

"Exactly. I had to run out for a few minutes, and she begged me to let her stay just until I returned. Foolishly, I did, and I'm sorry as hell."

Susan protested. "I thought . . . it looked as if you two had resumed your old relationship, so . . ."

"That's just what Valerie wanted you to think." Larry held Susan close, as if he would never again let her go. "In fact, if I hadn't smelled your

perfume still lingering in the hall, I'd never have known you were there at all."

Susan clasped Larry around the neck. All resistance and doubt disappeared in the joy of knowing, really knowing, that this man was her heart and soul, her very life's beat. "Larry Scofield, I love you."

Her face resting on his shoulder, he whispered, "'There is nothing holier in this life of ours than the first consciousness of love . . .'"

"Larry, it was you!"

"Who else would it be, Susie? Now, pack your suitcase. We have lots to do before flying off on our honeymoon."

"Yes, Larry." She turned back to him. "Did I tell you that I love you?"

Larry Scofield grinned. "Finally, Miss Nash, finally!"

Valley of Romance

JEAN WOODWARD

When Susan Nash answered the ad seeking a companion to a five-year-old boy, she did so more out of rebellion against Eric Bennett than for any other reason. Eric, a stolid young businessman, was content with their bowling dates and Friday night dinners at his mother's, and lacked the sense of adventure that lay just beneath Susan's calm exterior.

But even Susan could not have guessed the extent of the adventure awaiting her when she met Lawrence Scofield, a photographer for *World Magazine*, who had placed the ad in the paper. He wanted Susan to accompany him and Jay Lucerno, his five-year-old ward, to the Scofield ranch in Arizona.

And indeed, the cotton and cattle ranch belonging to Lawrence Scofield's father was a world unto itself. But threaded among the laughter and sunshine was a faint air of mystery, of something not quite right, and as it grew in intensity so did Susan's fears that her chance for happiness might never materialize.